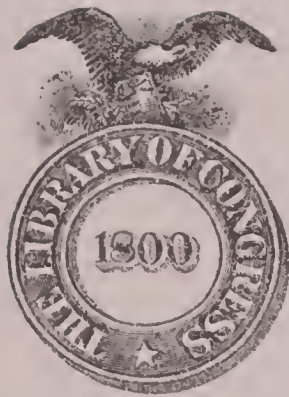


A GIRL
OF THE PLAINS
COUNTRY

A NOVEL FOR GIRLS

ALICE Mac GOWAN



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A GIRL *of the* PLAINS COUNTRY

BY

ALICE MACGOWAN

Author of "Judith of the Cumberlands," etc.



NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
MCMXXIV

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Printed in the United States of America

SEP - 2 '24

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A GIRL OF THE PLAINS COUNTRY

CHAPTER I

THE ARRIVAL

THE little girl on the back seat of the stage clung to one of the uprights of the vehicle as though she feared that when it stopped she would, in her enthusiasm, hurl herself bodily from it, and into this strange, interesting, dusty life of the plains country.

Hank Pearsall, manager of the Three Sorrows Ranch, who had driven the sixty miles in to Mesquite to meet the new owners coming all the way from New York, looked at her small face with its pointed chin, great black eyes under the thatch of dark curls, the repressed vitality with which she sat there giving more of an impression of urgency than most people could have given by running and jumping, and thought to himself that here was one who would all her life be a little happier, or a little more miserable, than the average.

The child returned his gaze with an eager, welcoming sort of look, and her eyes followed him as he stepped to the side of the stage. What she saw was a tall man of fifty, in the sort of clothes she was beginning to be familiar with—flannel shirt, trousers tucked into cowboy boots, and a sombrero, which he

took off now, uncovering thick, crinkled hair of a wonderful black-and-silver sheen. His face was tanned and bearded; it had a look of calm about the brows and temples; but the very deep blue eyes looked as though there was always a twinkle in them. He smiled at the little girl, but spoke to the man in the front seat.

City people, the Van Brunts. Hank knew that the wife and mother had died suddenly on the way out. To the elegant gentleman, handsome, with the marks of dissipation in his face, and the sleeping baby looking so strangely out of place in his arms, Hank said a little doubtfully:

“Mr. Van Brunt? Pearsall’s my name. I’ve brought the ambulance for you folks. It’s right across there.”

The young man climbed out and shifted to get a hand free to offer, answering in a low tone, and with great courtesy:

“We’re very glad to get here, Mr. Pearsall. This is my aunt, Miss Valeria Van Brunt,” and Pearsall turned to help down a small, silver-haired, fine-featured lady with a high, delicate nose and brilliant black eyes behind gold-rimmed nose-glasses. From the tiny jet bonnet to the high-heeled slippers and silk stockings, her fashionable clothing was dim with plains dust, and as she looked about at Mesquite—just a stage station, a bunch of shanties huddled together on the bald plain—she cried accusingly:

“Dear me, Charles! Is this the place? Why, it isn’t a town at all!”

Her nephew answered something, in that low, courteous tone of his, Hank didn’t hear what.

Among them, they seemed to have forgotten that there was another passenger to disembark at Mes-

quite. Pearsall realized with sure, swift sympathy, that the child was used to being forgotten; he put up his arms and lifted down little Hilda Van Brunt. They were all on the ground then, their luggage dumped beside them, and the stage jingled away.

"Is there any hotel?" Miss Valeria demanded. "We ought to have some rest—and dinner."

"It'll be all right," the ranch manager said quickly. "I've fixed for you. The ambulance is ready, and—"

"Ambulance!" Miss Valeria interrupted. "Is anybody hurt or—or sick—or anything like that? We certainly can't—"

"An ambulance is the regular family vehicle on all the ranches around here, ma'am," Pearsall explained. "You'll find it mighty comfortable traveling. I aim to have you get in now and drive out a piece to a good camping place. We'll have our supper there. There's plenty good bedding. And we'll get a soon start in the morning. No—well, nothing that you folks would call a hotel, here. You'll find it better that way."

The baby on Van Brunt's shoulder roused without a whimper, opened big, serious blue eyes and gazed about him. This gaze lit upon the little girl, fastened there, and slowly grew into a smile. His sister pressed in close to her father's side and reached up to pat the baby, then thrust her hand into Van Brunt's free one, urging:

"Oh, yes, papa—please let's go and have a picnic. It'll be so beautiful!" And Van Brunt said:

"Certainly, Pearsall. We're in your hands now."

The ranch boss got his passengers into the ambulance, Miss Van Brunt and her nephew with the baby on the back seat, Hilda perched beside him on the front. As he gathered up his lines he smiled down

at the tousled dark hair from which she had promptly pulled the much-trimmed small hat.

"Now for our picnic, sister," he said. "We're a-goin' to have a good long one. Sixty miles long. And camp overnight on the plain. I've got grub a-plenty, and everything fixed."

Hilda just gave him a smile and a little bubbling, inarticulate sound of delight in answer to this. Presently, when they went over a bump in the trail, her short legs made it necessary that she grasp his arm to keep from being shot forward over the dashboard.

"Why, here, this won't never do!" said the old man as he stopped the ponies, tied the lines to the brake-handle, and fished out from among the supplies a box which he wedged securely beneath her feet. When they started on once more, he said in a confidential tone: "Ye see, I put you up here, because Auntie ain't used to rough traveling; and your father, he's got little brother to look out for. You and me can stand the jouncing, can't we?"

With a sure instinct he had sounded the right note.

"Course we can!" the little girl echoed it with a sort of lyric jubilation. She took a long, pleased look at him, and began:

"Auntie finds it very hard to bear this kind of life. The nurse we had, she came as far as Amarillo; but she said she never in all her days saw such a flat country—and she despised it—and she just couldn't put up with it—and there wasn't any money ever made that would pay her to. So she went back. She went back to New York."

"I expect this does look considerable different from New York," Hank allowed mildly.

"Oh, it does!" Hilda glowed. "Beautifuller. I love the way it looks. Aunt Val, she's been a great

many places. But this—she wasn't ever here before. She's been to Europe, and to Egypt where the pyramids are, and the Sphinx that's all getting covered up with sand. I—” Hilda sent a half-shy, questing look into the old man's twinkling eyes—“I know a good deal about Phœnicians, and Cæsar, myself—Thor and his hammer, and Apollo, and the Holy Grail. My mother used to read to me about them.”

“Yes,” assented the ranch manager easily. “I guess them's mostly New Yorkers and such. I haven't the acquaintance of any of 'em.”

Hilda was silent for a few moments. This new friend was plainly somewhat given to humor. He might be jesting with her. Presently she spoke:

“But when—when my mother died in Denver, and there wasn't anybody to take care of Burchie and me, papa telegraphed to Aunt Val and she came. It was very good of her. She doesn't like the country—nor children, very much.” After a pause, she added, in a diminished voice, “Do you?”

“Do I what, honey?” asked Pearsall, starting a bit, for his mind had wandered from her prattle.

“Like children very much—and the country; this,” and her looks indicated the big world about them.

“Why, yes—yes, sure,” he protested. “I like this country, sister. And I certainly git a-plenty of it. But I'm a mighty lonesome person, sometimes—I'm a plumb lonesome old feller. You see there's no child that belongs to me.”

“Haven't you got any little girl?”

“No. No, not any little girl—” Quite a long pause, then,—“or boy either.”

Hilda moved uneasily, and her eyes went to his face and back again, plainly under the stress of acute compassion.

"Well," she hesitated, "I'll be your little girl, too, if—if you want me. You see, papa's got two of us."

The noises of the big vehicle had often made it necessary for the child to stretch up and put her rosy mouth close to her companion's ear in speaking. Now these last words were forwarded very carefully, and with a swift, backward glance toward the rear seat. Miss Van Brunt was engaged with a smelling bottle; Van Brunt held his son on his knee and stared across the baby's head toward a future which plainly daunted.

"That's a bargain, sister," said the driver. "From now on you're my little girl, too. And I'm your Uncle Hank. There's a few youngsters in the neighborhood, and that's what they call me."

That was a memorable drive, and it decided some important issues in the lives of those who made it. Sixty miles southward of Mesquite, in Lame Jones county, lay the ranch of the Three Sorrows which poor Katharine Van Brunt had bought with the remnant of her big fortune that Charley's dissipation had left—the haven to which she had thought to bring her weak husband and her two children. Now she slept in her grave in beautiful, far-away Denver, and the husband and children were going alone toward the home she would have made possible for them, but which, without her, looked doubtful indeed. An hour—another hour—the team of cow ponies loped steadily across that high upland floor of brown plain.

"Like the sea," whispered Hilda, enraptured. "Just like the sea, only the water's all grass—and you can drive over it. It jounces; but you and I—we can stand the jouncing."

The fierce glare of mid-afternoon softened, grew milder and milder as the day waned. Hilda felt that

she had never really seen the sun set before. It went down in a great glory of painted sky that rushed out over the floor of the plain so that everything—the ponies, the ambulance and its little cloud of dust—swam in it.

“It’s getting very late, Mr.—er—Pearsall—isn’t it?” Miss Valeria asked unhappily from the back seat. “Isn’t there danger of our being lost if we try to travel in the dark?”

“No, ma’am—not with me—you wouldn’t git lost, day or night,” Uncle Hank, as the little girl already called him in her own mind, turned a smiling face over his shoulder to answer. “But we’re most there now. See them willers where the moon’s a-risin’? That’s our camp.”

“Willers where the moon’s a-risin’.” It jingled in the little head like poetry; it still sang there as they swung in beside a small creek that was just a succession of water holes with dry rocks between, and she was lifted out. For, oh, the moon was rising, and so beautiful! It came up, a great shield of white in the pink that had somehow crept around from the sunset in the west; it looked over the willows and turned them black on one side and silver on the other; it shone on the little girl very knowingly, as if to say, “I’m not the same moon at all that I was back in New York—you and I know that.” And every bit of beauty, whether it was in the sky or on the earth, everything that was dear and lovely in this new life—and so much was—she attributed to the new friend whom she was going to call Uncle Hank forever and ever.

The others had climbed out very gladly; Miss Valeria was established on the cushions from the seats with the baby beside her. Hilda was allowed to help

—or to think she helped—Uncle Hank, when he came back from unharnessing, watering and picketing the horses, and set about getting the evening meal. She ranged as far as the creek bank for little sticks, and fed them into the side of the fire where the coffee-pot was. Hank had brought a box from the back of the ambulance which seemed to hold a whole pantry, and was broiling steaks on the other side of the fire. Bread was cut, canned milk and jam and other things opened, butter brought out, with knives, forks and plates—tin plates, and funny knives and forks and spoons such as you generally saw in the kitchen; one or two little stew-pots simmered on their own beds of coals; Hilda looked from them all to the shadowy earth, the moon-filled sky, quite overwhelmed with the magic she saw in both. Above them was such a great space of silver light as she had never seen before; down here, right in the center of it, burned their single point of fire; she watched its flame go up and up, saw pieces of it break off to fly away to the big white stars and the moon. She almost forgot to eat her supper when it was put out for her on its plate. (Supper was a new word to Hilda. It was dinner, at home, in the house. It must be supper when you cooked it and ate it like this out-of-doors.)

Aunt Val ate hers, and seemed to like it pretty well; but afterward she looked uneasy, and said anxiously:

“I’m afraid this night air will bring on my neuralgia.”

Hilda looked at her in wonder. This lovely, wandering air that was turning over the willow leaves as though it wanted to look at the dark under-sides of them, that came touching her cheeks, softly fingering her hair; it seemed to Hilda that if it really “brought

on" anything that thing must be mysterious and delightful.

But Uncle Hank got up quickly, saying:

"I'll fix your bed for you right now, ma'am; you'll be as snug there as if you was in your own room," and went over to the ambulance. When Hilda followed him a little later, there was a bed all made up in it, with sheets and pillow-cases and everything, just like a bed at home. Aunt Val made haste to get into it, and Hilda drifted back to the fire. She wished she had got Aunt Val to show her how to fix Burchie's food. Papa was tending to it now. When Burch had had it, he went right off to sleep, and was carried over and put in beside Aunt Val.

The new proprietor of the Three Sorrows, when he had laid the baby in the ambulance, walked on past the vehicle and was lost in the shadows down by the creek. Pearsall began to clear up and wash the dishes. Hilda asked if she might help, and was given a towel for drying. Uncle Hank began to make cheerful conversation.

"This was a mighty long trip for a little girl like you—all the way from New York to Texas. Didn't you get tired?"

"Oh, no," said Hilda, earnestly drawing her towel between the tines of the iron fork she was wiping. "You see, there was a boy on the train that had blue eyes, like Burchie's and mothers, and—and—" blushing furiously—"like yours, some. He was a big boy. At least he was a good deal bigger than me. His father and mother were there, too; they came all the way from New York to Denver in the train with us. And, oh, he was most interesting! When my mother got sick, the boy's mother wouldn't go on and leave us. They all stayed. And he—The-Boy-On-The-

Train—he took care of Burchie and me when—when the funeral was. Aunt Val hadn't got there, then."

"That's all, honey; we're done, now," said Pearsall. He saw that the child's lips trembled as she stood fumblingly but determinedly rubbing dry the last cup. So he added, cheerfully, "We'll set by the fire a spell before you go tuck yourself into bed."

There was neither sound nor movement within the ambulance. Van Brunt did not return from his stroll downstream. These two, man and child, sat beside the camp-fire. Hilda's big black eyes looked long into the great swallowing darkness of the plain, then she turned to her companion, who was filling his pipe.

"I don't think I'd be afraid here," she said, a little doubtfully.

"Sure not!" heartily. He skipped a coal lightly up in his bare fingers, made it light his pipe, and flipped it off again. "What would you be afraid of, sister?"

"Well," slowly, and watching his face, "I don't think there would be whiffenpoofs here." He didn't smile—she had been afraid he might. So she added the explanation, "You see, they mostly stay in dark halls and on stairways, whiffenpoofs do, and they grab you from behind."

"No," Uncle Hank shook his head decisively, "no whiffenpoofs here—if there is anywhere—which I doubt."

"Oh, yes, they're in houses." Hilda was pretty firm about it. "And—" She hesitated, looked away from him, then shot him one of her shy glances before she went on haltingly—"And another reason I thought I wouldn't be afraid here is that there aren't any doors."

He took the pipe out of his mouth, looked at it, then at her, and asked blankly:

“No doors?”

“Yes. And so there can't be a door-imp. When it's getting a little dark,” she spoke low now, and very fast, as though she were afraid if she didn't hurry she wouldn't have the courage to tell it all, “when it's getting a little dark in the house, and they send you into another room to get something, the Skulking Door-imp watches for you. He comes out and looks around the door; then his head is the thing that you think is a knob. You see, he's invisible to every one but me.”

“Truck like that,” said Uncle Hank, putting the pipe back into his mouth and drawing his arm around Hilda, “is enough to scare a little girl.”

“It does scare me, Uncle Hank,” she confirmed gravely. “And those aren't all. There's ghosts. And there's the Barrel-tops—queer kind of creatures that just roll after you. I most scream right out sometimes when the Barrel-tops come down the dark hall chasing me.”

“Well, I'll bet you four cents,” and he shook her gently with his arm, “that they don't never come down no hall out here in Texas. I'll be willin' to just bet. Them things can't live in this high-and-dry Texas plains climate. Where on earth did you ever get such notions, anyhow? Did some one tell it to you, or did it come out of a fool book?”

“No,” said Hilda evasively, “nobody told me, nor read it to me. I—er—I just knew it myself.”

“Well, then, you must 've made it up, child. I wouldn't do it if I 's you. I wouldn't have no such critters.”

“I try not to, Uncle Hank. I don't want to have them. They—oh! what's that?” as a long, jingling, chiming whimper came from somewhere in the sur-

rounding dusk. She flung both arms around the old man's neck and burrowed her head on his breast. He held her tight, and laughed gently.

"Nothing but a little old coyote, honey," he told her. "They don't ever hurt anybody. He smells our bacon rinds. You must go to bed now, child. If any whiffenpoofs or suchlike cattle trouble you in the night, you come out to Uncle Hank—hear? Uncle Hank's death on all them kind o' varmints."

He saw her to the ambulance, then turned and replenished the fire and, filling his pipe, sat down to await Van Brunt's return. An hour later the two men were asleep, wrapped in their blankets. There was no sound save the wind in the cottonwoods and the occasional, far, coyote cry, the nearer chirp or stir of a bird. During the earlier part of the night Van Brunt groaned, turned and turned again; roused, sighed, rose to feed the dying fire, sat a while beside it, and went back to his blankets. Then he slept heavily, and for a long time the camp was silent under the moon and stars. In the dark hour just before dawn the old man wakened suddenly and opened his eyes to see Hilda crouching beside him, her hand on his shoulder.

"Uncle Hank!" she gasped, "I had such a dreadful dream, and when I waked, why, you see that ambulance is like a room; it's got things like doors in it; and I was afraid the door-imp—"

"All right, sister."

He lifted his head and looked about. She had left her aunt unawakened in the ambulance; she had skirted the form of her sleeping father—and come to him—to him, the friend of a day!

"Here!" whispered the man who had said he was all alone in the world. Swiftly he unwound his

blankets, wrapped the small nightgowned figure in them, and settled her cosily, reaching down to get his boots and draw them on.

"But you aren't going away, Uncle Hank?" quavered the child.

"Not fur," returned he humorously, as he went over and put more wood on the fire, then seated himself beside the giant cocoon from whose top protruded the small face with the big black eyes. These eyes, under the influence of a good grip on a man's blue flannel sleeve, gradually lost their wildness. They filmed gently; the long lashes descended halfway, were swept up again with a startled gasp; and after two or three checkings and haltings, Hilda slept. The ranch boss replaced the blankets when from time to time her small, impatient arm flung them off.

Lost in the immensity of night, the camp-fire died down, was replenished, died down again, and showed only winking embers as the east began to blush with a new day.

CHAPTER II

AN AFFAIR OF THE HEART

SOUTHWESTWARD again, all that day—beautifully long for the little girl, wearily lengthened for Miss Valeria who alternately complained of the speed and urged the driver to hurry a little. Pearsall always gave her the same good-humored answer, as though it had been a child fretting at him: “Ponies got forty-odd miles to go, ma’am; have to just hold this same good road pace.”

At noon they stopped and got out for a rest; a “dry camp” he called it, with only water from the canteens to make their coffee. Through the afternoon, the thud-thud of hoofs, the creak and swish of wheels on dry turf, like a monotonous old tune, almost sent Hilda to sleep where she sat beside Uncle Hank on the high seat. Then, when the sky flamed once more red with sunset, suddenly there was living green in front of them, the ambulance swung through an open gate, up a long avenue of young box-elders and black locusts, at the end of which they could see a low stone house, broad, sheltering, hospitable, with its dooryard of Bermuda grass, at the edge of which Pearsall pulled up, got out and helped the others down. Van Brunt, who had sat silent and uncomplaining for hours of heat and weariness, exclaimed:

“This the ranch? Why, Pearsall, I didn’t suppose there was such a green place in all the Panhandle.”

“Well, there’s not another like the Three Sorrows, I can tell you,” answered the old man, busy with bags

and valises; and as they moved toward the house Miss Valeria murmured that it was better than could have been expected.

Hilda, hanging back, saying nothing, gazed about at the new home with eyes that loved every stone in its walls. Its pleasant rustle of leaves and lisp of water, after all those miles of splendid, arid plain, made her eyes smart with happy tears. The beautiful wing-like, curving sweep in which the line of young cottonwoods, following the happy course of a tiny irrigating ditch, flung away around one corner of the building—here was a world where anything—lovely—might happen. Those willows over yonder by the little lake (the old man called it a watering tank), they looked just like Nixies crouching down in their long green hair. There was mystery in the very appearance of the plain about them. When a Chinaman came to the door she could have shouted with delight.

He was a strange, limp effigy of a Chinaman, like a badly made rag doll, his slant eyes and pigtail giving the impression that he had lately been hung up on a line with other such toys. Apparently he was young, though the Oriental never looks to our eyes either exactly young or old, and certainly he was morose. The queue on his head, the dull blue blouse he wore, his funny black-and-white boat-shaped shoes, all charmed Hilda.

The first thing she saw that looked like the old home back in New York was a familiar rug spread out at the foot of the stairs in the hall.

"I s'pose your full-sized carpets ain't come yet," Pearsall explained, as he showed his employer the living-room on one side, the ranch office on the other. "These mats looked a good deal worn," he indicated

the dull bloom of Turkish rugs disposed here and there, "but of course they'll be nice and soft for the children to play on."

Van Brunt assented kindly, and neither he nor Miss Valeria offered any explanation. It was near supper time. The open door at the end of the hall showed a shouldering group of masculine forms, ranch riders, heretofore familiar to the eyes of the newcomers only in pictures. The foremost of these detached himself, came forward, and was presented as O'Meara—"One of your boys, Mr. Van Brunt." Hilda liked the look of him, and was more pleased when he spoke.

"We didn't know where you'd want your things," he said modestly. "We took everybody's opinion—even the Chink's—but at that we couldn't make out what some of 'em was intended for. We just put the trunks around here and there to make it seem home-like."

Hilda wondered that her aunt's response to this should be so faint. Shorty O'Meara's ideas on furnishing and interior decoration had immediate success with her. The open door of the office room showed a big desk, some chairs, and a pile or two of books on the floor. The little girl left that without further inquiry, and went into the living-room where a spindle-legged, inlaid dressing table, with its sweep of mirror, neighbored a trunk and several dining-room chairs. There were more books here, on the floor, the chairs, the window-sills. These latter were very deep. They might well have been specially designed for sitting in of rainy afternoons to look at picture books or play with dolls. The grown-ups walked about and looked somewhat unhappy. She had forgotten them almost in her survey of her new home. She presently got Burch and lugged him about, talking

to him, since he was the only individual present sensible enough to really appreciate the attractiveness of the place. The roughcast plastered walls looked so sheltering and strong. The open doorway into the dining-room showed a great long table. All of those men were going to eat there. She groped vaguely for a line in a ballad with which her mother used to sing her to sleep—something about the baron sitting in his hall and his retainers being blithe and gay. The table wasn't in the hall, of course, but otherwise it was just the same.

Then came Aunt Valeria's voice calling to her from upstairs; she followed that weary lady, and she and Burch were washed and made seemly for the table.

That first supper was a wonderful meal to her, too, with a lot of tall men trooping in to sit at the board. Their bronzed faces, their keen, forth-looking eyes, used to search great levels, the air of individuality, of independence, laid powerful hold on the child's fancy. Every time a spur jingled beneath the table, or one of those big voices boomed out suddenly, her heart leaped in swift though uncomprehending response.

Afterward, in the living-room, she heard with some anxiety, Pearsall doubtfully suggest to her father that they might want to build a separate mess house for the men. Her father said no, he didn't mind the men at the table; and Hilda heaved a great sigh of relief. She had already struck up quite a friendship with blond, talkative Shorty O'Meara; she had even made some timid overtures to a lank, elderly cynic who lived up to the name of Old Snake Thompson. To have her social adventures in this direction curtailed would have been trying.

The days that followed the arrival were strange,

interesting ones. Her father was wrapped in an obscurity of dejection and grief; Miss Van Brunt was a victim of neuralgia which she declared the plains wind had developed. The child had only the baby brother, with the occasional companionship of Uncle Hank and some of the younger cowboys; yet she made eager acquaintance with this new life; and it was to the old man she came for information or to share with him her joys.

"All the horses you ride are yellow ones, Uncle Hank, aren't they?" she asked him one evening when he came in from the range.

"Yes, honey, I've rode a buckskin pony for a good many years. I reckon the folks wouldn't hardly know me on any other color of hoss. I sort of think they're becoming to me—don't you?"

"Oh, yes, very," Hilda assured him gravely. "What's this one's name?"

"Why, you see, I just call 'em all 'Buckskin.' It's easiest."

Sometimes he took her out for short rides, of an evening, holding her before him on the saddle of the tall buckskin horse with a blaze face, or the little dark buckskin pony that had a brown mane and tail. Traveling in this fashion one evening across pastures she pointed to a queer, humped object, sway-backed, with a ewe-neck, and a rough coat of brindled hair that stuck up like the nap on a half-worn rug.

"What's that, Uncle Hank? It looks something like a calf."

"'S a dogie, honey," he explained, absently.

"A dogie," the child repeated. "Dogies are a kind of animal I don't know. Is it wild, or tame?"

Pearsall laughed.

"You was right in the first place, sister," he said.

"That pore little skeesicks is a calf. It lost its mother when it was too young to eat grass rightly; so it sort of starves along, and gets stunted and runted. We call 'em dogies. You'll see one every once in a while, round over the range. They're no good to nobody—nor to theirselves."

"Oh," said Hilda, under her breath.

A day or so later, finding her a bit drooping, Pearsall questioned:

"What's the matter, sister? Is something worrying you?"

"Uncle Hank," she explained, with some diffidence, "my heart is sad about dogies. I saw two of them to-day, and my heart is sad about them, ever since."

(She had wanted to say, in the language of one of her favorite ballads, "My heart is wae"; but judged that that might be a little too much for her companion, and tried him with a simpler literary form.)

"Is it, honey?" inquired the old man, easily. "Oh, I guess I wouldn't worry about 'em. Remember that we don't ever butcher 'em, nor even brand 'em."

"That's part of the sadness," Hilda maintained, shaking her head. "It's just like I used to want to cry when I saw the little dwarfed people in the shows, that aren't children, and never will be grown up."

Into the long talks which the two held together of an evening, Hilda often introduced that hero who never had any other name than The-Boy-On-The-Train.

"He knew most everything, Uncle Hank," she once declared.

"I reckon so, honey," assented Pearsall; but he seemed to Hilda not sufficiently impressed. She sought in her recollection for definite marvels to attribute to this favorite, and came hard up against that

trying fact we all meet, that you cannot communicate to another the fascination you have experienced. It is something to be felt, not put into words. Pressed thus, Hilda stated one day to Uncle Hank that her hero could understand the language of birds. He accepted it with much too great facility, reconciled thereto by the fact that a person in Hilda's book of fairy tales, which she had shown him earlier in the evening, could do the same. But the statement kept its author awake the greater part of the night, and a penitent, small Hilda climbed up into his arms as soon as he sat down after supper next evening and explained:

"Why, Uncle Hank, you know The-Boy-On-The-Train, he couldn't quite—what I said—understand all that the birds were talking about."

"Couldn't he, Pettie?" inquired Hank placidly.

"No," said Hilda with solemnity. "He might just as well have, but he couldn't. He could just understand what people said; but—" The small face flushed deeply; word forms rushed fluidly about in the stress and flux of her emotion—"but he understood that awful good."

If Hilda had come to a group of children, The-Boy-On-The-Train must have grown dim behind the stirring realities of actual companionship. But in the lonely life that began for her now, he filled in many an hour which might be otherwise forlorn. He did not lose vividness. She saw him at that ranch he had spoken of, riding the marvelous pony which would shake hands, perfecting himself in those manly sports upon which he had casually touched, and which her lively fancy was liberally providing for him. As time went on, he grew of course; yet he remained delight-

fully a boy, her champion and hero in the dream world which was always so real to the imaginative child.

Meanwhile Pearsall, who had been for some time manager for a non-resident owner, had only remained to go over tallies, count of stock, and deliver to the purchaser the ranch and its appurtenances. This work was done now, the details all complete, and upon an evening Hank had brought his tally sheets and the mass of statements and figures to young Van Brunt in the ranch office, where he sat explaining the situation patiently to the other man.

It was past the children's bedtime; Burch was asleep upstairs; but the little girl had twice been sent from the room with an admonition of increasing sharpness from her father. And still Pearsall could see from the tail of his eye that she hung just outside the door.

"But, Pearsall," Van Brunt, helpless city man, repeated in a sort of blank dismay, "you don't mean to say you're leaving me—right now—when I need you worst? Why, what on earth will I do?"

"You know," said Hank mildly. "I explained it to you last week, Mr. Van Brunt. When the ranch was sold, back three months ago, I looked out for another job. I got one, with the Quita Que, over in New Mexico, and they put me on forfeit—"

"No business man," broke in Van Brunt. "I suppose I didn't understand. The fault is mine, Pearsall. But this—I—I'm about as competent to run a ranch as Burch would be. I somehow took it for granted that you were to be manager. Can't we—I will gladly pay that forfeit, if you are willing to stay—long enough at least to get me started."

Hank raised a warning hand as Hilda's face again

showed at the door. The child did not edge in, as she had edged before! She made straight for Pearsall—though she winced at her father's impatient exclamation—climbed to the old man's lap, and looked searchingly into his face.

"Uncle Hank—you—going away?" She choked on the last word, then added half desperately, "Not—to stay? You'll come back—won't you?"

Van Brunt's strained attitude relaxed a little; he sat back vaguely in his chair, glancing from one to the other, the dismay in his face gradually giving way to a half doubtful gleam of hope. Hank was silent a moment, Hilda watching him, openly restraining tears. The manager had seen more than one Easterner launch himself and everything he possessed in this cattle ranching game, and, ill prepared, inexperienced, lose all. Before him was another candidate for just such another calamitous failure. But it was the warm little body trembling on his lap, the big dark eyes searching his, that he was most conscious of.

"That's all right, Pettie—about me going away," he began hesitantly. Then with more certainty, and setting her gently down, "You run along to bed, honey."

She moved a little, with childhood's tragic reluctance, in the direction of the door, then turned with just a mute look into his face. Hank gave her a reassuring smile.

"Time them big black peepers was shut, Pettie," he said easily. "And it's all right. If I do have to go away, I'll come straight back. Don't you worry. I'm not goin' to quit the Sorrers. Reckon I'll stay as long as you do."

"Then—" began Hilda. But her throat swelled so that she couldn't finish it. It was going to be, "Then, if you will never forsake me, I will never forsake you,"

—a line from one of her best loved fairy stories—all of that, even here before papa. But the best she could do was, “Then—I’ll go—Uncle Hank.” And she crept out.

When they heard her feet pattering on the stairs, Van Brunt began to speak, but Hank stopped him with a shake of the head.

“No, Mr. Van Brunt; I’ll pay the forfeit. It’s me that’s ruing back on a contract with the Matador, not you. I’ll stay.” Then, after a pause, “I thought likely I’d have to—that is, if you wanted me—that first day driving down from Mesquite. I’m all set to stay. That’s settled. We’ll say no more about it.”

CHAPTER III

THE FIRING SQUAD

DOMESTIC existence at the Three Sorrows was, in those days, a very unsettled affair. Came the day that sullen Chinaman left. Charles Van Brunt had ridden to Mesquite; all the boys were out on the range; the baby was asleep upstairs; Hilda and Aunt Val were alone with the problem. The little girl stood by, while to Miss Van Brunt's protests—which finally came to be almost hysterical—the yellow man made brief response: "No can do. Velly lonesome." And though the lady pleaded with him for quite a distance down the long avenue of box elder and black locust, he walked stolidly away in those boat-shaped shoes of his, his lips tightly shut, his blouse tightly buttoned across a resolute bosom, his queue tightly coiled around a skull which housed the working machinery of a mind with which poor Aunt Val had never been able to establish communication, nor Hilda to get upon friendly terms.

Uncle Hank himself got supper that evening; but he remarked somewhat humorously that he couldn't spare himself to cook, and persuaded Missouri into donning an apron and going to work in the kitchen.

"Why don't they get another Chink?" the cowboy grumbled.

"Well, as I understand it, they *have* wrote some-where for one, but they haven't heard yet," said Pearsall.

"No, nor they won't," was Missouri's opinion. "A'

Chink's plumb shy of one of these here lonesome ranches. I bet I'm in for a life sentence," for a ranch rider hates to cook.

Nothing that really could have been called a neighborhood existed in the cattle country of the Lame Jones County of that day, yet the Van Brunts had not been at the Three Sorrows a week before there was an invitation for Miss Valeria to bring Hilda and Burch to spend the day at the Capadine ranch, six miles east of them, and enjoy the company of Clark Capadine, Jr., and the ranch's young guests, the two Marchbanks children. Shorty drove them over in the buckboard—a vehicle Hilda approved of far more than the shiny closed carriage at home in New York.

To Hilda that visit was a first introduction into the life of her peers as she was to find it from that time on. Clarkie Capadine was a good-natured boy of ten, whom Hilda would have liked very much if she had been capable that day of any natural or comfortable sentiments. But the Marchbanks boy, an advanced person whose name was Lafayette, shortened and pronounced in the Southern fashion, "Fayte," scorned her utterly. He scorned also his sister Maybelle, five years younger than himself, and therefore near Hilda's own age. Yet his contempt of Maybelle was nothing worse than the male intolerance of the foolish female, while Hilda learned from him, coldly, insultingly, that she was a tenderfoot. She was not only a child, and a girl at that—she was a tenderfoot. Did she know what chaparajos were?—tapaderos?—latigos?—a cinch, even? She did not. Maybelle was not expected to deal much in these terms on account of her deficiencies as a girl; but Hilda didn't even know what such things were for! She was a tenderfoot—that's what she was!

The day was clouded by the murk of Fayte's sneers.

He condescended to rope the girls as they ran screaming; but being rated as dumb driven cattle, even by so mighty a person, wasn't much of a consolation. Finally he scalped his sister's dolls by the simple process of pulling their wigs off. Maybelle went whimpering to Mrs. Capadine, who indignantly told the boy that he would not be allowed to go on the return visit to the Three Sorrows which Miss Valeria was already proposing. Fayte said sullenly that he didn't want to. He said that the Three Sorrows was his ranch, anyhow—by rights—and far's he was concerned he didn't care to go and see other people living on it.

His ranch! What could Fayte Marchbanks mean by that? The next day Hilda took the question to her father, but he only laughed. It was Uncle Hank—Uncle Hank, who always talked to one the same as to grown-ups—who finally explained the matter to her, allowing tolerantly, "Oh, just a kid's bragging. Fayte Marchbanks says things like that, I expect, because his Spanish grandpa, old man Romero, was the first owner of this ranch, and did give the place its name—the Rancho of the Three Sorrows."

"What do you suppose made him call it such a sad name, Uncle Hank?" Hilda wanted to know. "Do you suppose he had them—three sorrows?"

"He did so, Pettie—in his three daughters. Michaela, his oldest, she took smallpox from a family of Arkansas movers that came driftin' through these pastures two weeks before she was to have been married. Her looks was ruined. She went into a convent up in Santy Fe. Lola, the next one, was killed in a train wreck. And Guadeloupe, the third, his baby, and the prettiest of the bunch, ran away with Lee Marchbanks, which is Fayte's and Maybelle's pa. He said neither of them should ever step foot on his land while he

lived. Old Romero's wife was dead, and he never had no sons. He took the trouble about his daughters hard. He drank up all his property—"Hilda had a moment of wondering how he could do that—"and then drank himself to death."

"Maybelle says her mother is dead, too," said Hilda. "They had the sorrow, didn't they, Uncle Hank? Maybelle and Fayte, I mean."

"Um—well—it's all in the past, honey. And Lee Marchbanks—Colonel Marchbanks, they call him, now—is a rich man, I hear, over in New Mexico. Jest leaving the kids with Mrs. Capadine while he brings out his second wife from the east somewheres. I expect they'll have a fine lady for a mother when they go back."

"Yes," said Hilda, turning this information over slowly and curiously in her mind. "I didn't know that." She stole a look over her shoulder, through the open door, to where Miss Van Brunt, dressed exactly as she had been used to dress back in her New York home, sat reading a magazine. "Of course I have Aunt Valeria," she remarked hesitantly.

Hank's glance followed hers; he crinkled up his eyes in a look that was half smiling, half pitiful. Poor Miss Valeria always looked somehow like a person who had come to stay for only a day or two. The wind that whooped up over those great levels from the Gulf, and brought life and refreshment with it on the hottest summer noon, the wind that Hilda loved and made a playmate of, was to Miss Van Brunt a terrible bugbear—a sort of standing accusation against the whole west Texas country. When it blew three days on end, she went to bed with a nervous headache. When the domestic affairs of the household grew too puzzling, she went to bed with a headache, anyhow;

one day Hilda heard Buster say to Missouri in the kitchen, "This here ranching proposition's got the New York lady plumb buffaloed. Yet she's sort of game, too—so game she won't holler. I like to watch her not knowin' what the mischief's a-comin' next, nor whichaway to turn, and pretendin' she's plumb wise to the rules."

"It would be impossible. We never did so in New York. The Van Brunts do not do things that way." These were Miss Valeria's weapons of defense, the statements with which she met and repelled clamorous demands.

"Just a ladylike way of yellin' 'scat' to the whole business," said Buster.

As for the outside affairs, a mere change of ownership was a small matter, so long as Hank Pearsall's experienced hand still guided them, and they seemed to run smoothly enough. Charley Van Brunt, too, lived at the ranch of the Three Sorrows, a guest—a quiet, graceful guest—whose incompetence was a shield against responsibility. He endeared himself at once to his men by the unvarying courtesy and sweetness of his bearing and the boyish recklessness he displayed when he chose and rode a horse, selecting always for looks and style, without regard to the beast's disposition. It was plain that he drank heavily in the long evenings when he sat alone in the library, his manager, looking on, hoping that as the first keenness of his grief wore away, this matter would be bettered.

But it was the other way. When Charley began to rouse from the stupor of bereavement, he began also to leave the ranch, on trips to Mesquite, and beyond to El Centro; whence the news came back to Hank that Van Brunt was drinking hard and playing high. He found by natural instinct the clever, well-bred,

profligate young Englishmen over on the Bar Thirteen, pensioned—or exiled—by their own families; and after that, between the trips to town, there was drinking and card playing at the Bar Thirteen. In those days the Three Sorrows was the finest property under private ownership in the Panhandle, with pastures all fenced—a rare thing at that time—watered by three noble creeks whose springs were never dry. It had been well stocked when Katharine bought it. Now Hank looked helplessly on, thinking of the two children, saw the money from sales of beef poured into the bottomless pit of Charley's dissipations. And he understood that more than one mortgage had been put on the place, and that a choice pasture had been sold outright.

And Hank had another small worry, to which he finally applied his own remedy. The men loved to sit on the long back porch, chairs tilted against the wall, waiting for supper. They were freshly washed as to faces and hands, damply slick as to hair; their innocent enjoyment of company other than their own was so evident that it would have been a hard heart indeed which would have grudged them the society of the children; yet Hank listened and was troubled. Did all cowboys swear so much? Had Snake Thompson's language always been what it now appeared? This might be Charley Van Brunt's ranch, Charley Van Brunt's back porch, and these might be Charley Van Brunt's children—well, as a matter of fact, the ownership of all the articles mentioned was so placed—yet Hank felt himself obliged to speak out and speak distinctly on the subject.

“Boys,” he put it, “you-all have got to ride herd a little closer on your language. Swearing—leastways more'n reason—around where children air at—”

"Say, Hank," broke in Shorty O'Meara, "how much is in reason to swear when your stirrup leather busts on you, and your left eyebrow hits the ground?"

"Aw, g'long with you," Hank admonished, half sheepishly. "You know how much. If you don't you'll soon find out."

Old Snake Thompson's sense of humor, liberty and justice was outraged. Snake used very little language of any sort; when he talked at all it was apt to be done almost exclusively in more or less conventional and automatic profanity, and he made husky protest:

"But, Pearsall—Goddlemighty—I mean—how's a man to talk? How's a feller to express hisself? How'll we get along without any o' them words?"

"Well," said Hank dryly, "I could give you a pretty fair list of substitutes."

"Substitute cuss words?"

"Yes, jest that. You may never have took notice to the fact that I don't cuss, nor chew tobacker? Well, I used to do both—fact, I was something of a star performer in them two lines."

"What made you quit, Pearsall?" questioned Shorty discontentedly.

"I quit," said Hank, "when I got to be a family man, in a manner of speaking. I had a—there was a small chap at my place then, nigh about Pettie's age, and I sort of looked it over, and made the change on the little feller's account."

"Huh!" grunted Old Snake. Shorty made no comment, but Missouri said with feeling:

"This da—durned cattle country is a mighty lonesome land, with few pleasures in it, if you ask me, and a man that neither chews nor cusses misses a sight o' comfort."

"Oh, I dunno, Missou'," the boss demurred mildly,

"I've tried it both ways, and I don't see much difference in the comfort. I get as much good out of a cup of coffee as I used to get out of a jolt of red-eye. I'd rather beller a camp meetin' hymn, or 'The Dyin' Ranger' than chew tobacker. 'Con-twist it!' or 'Sufferin' snakes' or 'My granny' is the most horrible oaths I use." He concluded with sudden seriousness, "I'm not a-joking; I won't stand for it, boys; I'll fire the first galoot that turns loose and cusses or talks rough around where the folks is at."

So the three S cowpunchers rode in off the range of an evening now, the most harmless associates for the little girl. About headquarters they spoke—though somewhat haltingly at times—a tamed and disciplined language, devoid of offense to the tenderest ears.

The Capadines were to come over for noon dinner—which was the only meal you could take visiting on ranches, it seemed, unless you spent the night. Missou' had said things—Uncle Hank went into the kitchen and shut the door when he said them—but finally he got the dinner, Uncle Hank keeping an eye on him to see that it was all it should be for company. Fayte Marchbanks had come, after all. Things went pretty well while the children were with the grown-ups, for it appeared that Fayte had nice company manners, when he cared to display them; Aunt Val thought him a very well-bred boy. But after dinner, Burchie in the house with Aunt Val and Mrs. Capadine, while the two fathers smoked on the porch, it began to be trying.

On the journey out, among other and greater losses, a trunk containing the children's toys had gone astray and was never recovered. So Hilda had nothing to offer for Maybelle's admiration but one small china-all-over doll, which had been held out for her to play with on the train. She realized with a good deal of

satisfaction that Fayette Marchbanks couldn't scalp it; the hair was painted on its china head; small and rather miserable as it looked there were advantages.

The two boys presently ranged off with Fayette's air rifle, playing at hunting big game; the two girls settled down in the roots of a big tree and arranged for a little dinner.

"I wish I'd brought my dolls," Maybelle said discontentedly. "I would—only I thought you'd have a lot of your own. You said you had."

"I have, only—" and poor Hilda told again the story of the lost trunk.

"Well, then, I should think they'd buy you some new ones, if they can't ever get those again," Maybelle argued.

"They will," said Hilda eagerly. "Father's going to next time he goes to town."

"But he's been in town lots of times since you lost 'em," said Maybelle, the practical. "Why doesn't he bring you—one decent one, anyhow?" She looked scornfully at the china-all-over.

"He forgets." Hilda's lip trembled, but it would never do to let any one see how cruel the hurt of this forgetfulness was. "That is, he has been forgetting it, but if ever he goes to Fort Worth he'll remember, and then he'll bring me the most beautiful doll that money can buy. It'll be so long," her trembling hands measured the length, "and have kid shoes and a white dress and a blue sash—he's promised. Now I'll go and get something for our party."

Hilda was gone to the house quite a while. Missou' had been hard to persuade, and didn't want to let her have the little cakes. When she came back she found Maybelle curiously excited, while the two boys stood

back, Clarke Capadine looking rather scared, Fayte grinning.

"Will you boys come to our party?" she asked doubtfully, taking stock of what Missou' had finally given her, wondering whether it would be enough.

Clarke muttered and looked down, but Fayte grinned more than ever.

"Sure. Let's make it a funeral—if there's scraps enough to bury. The firing squad's been here while you were gone."

And then she saw the scattered bits of china sprinkled over the play-house, the rifle in his hand.

Hilda didn't know for a minute quite who it was that screamed. Something that was not herself seemed to come up in her throat and issue from her mouth in a volume of sound that scared the children and brought the men running from the porch. Quickly as they came, Uncle Hank was quicker. He had jumped away from the pony he was just about mounting over at the corral, and run across the lawn; Hilda was in his arms when her father and Mr. Capadine arrived.

"What in time's the matter?" the old man asked. Clarke Capadine had stood his ground, but Fayte Marchbanks was running. Hank caught sight of the gun in his hand. "Is the child shot?"

"My doll! My doll!" Hilda's voice had come down to a moan. "I hadn't but just one, and—"

Maybelle's finger was in her mouth. She took it out to point to the little sprinkling of white scraps.

"Hilda—are you hurt?" That was her father. "Put her down, Pearsall. See if she's injured." Uncle Hank set her on her feet. The gust of passion had gone by. She was weak from it—and terribly ashamed.

"He broke her doll," the old man explained. Hilda

loved him for the serious tone. Maybelle giggled. Hilda heard another laugh somewhere, but it wasn't Mr. Capadine, for he said:

"That boy ought to be thrashed."

She turned and buried her face against Uncle Hank, sobbing now, but very quietly.

"Hilda—don't be silly," came Miss Val's impatient voice. "Go get another doll to play with. See—you're spoiling all the good time for your little visitors."

"I—hadn't—but just one," it came very muffled from the folds of Uncle Hank's coat. Her father said quickly,

"Oh, that's so. But, Hilda, I'm going to buy you more dolls. Be a good girl now. Stop crying."

"I don't want but just one, papa." Hilda choked, raised her head and tried to straighten her face. "When—when will you get me my doll?"

They were all looking at her. It was a terrible moment. Yet Hilda somewhat forgot it in the importance of that question.

"The very next time I go to town," said her father. "The handsomest one I can find, dear. Now go on with your play—and don't let's have any more hysterics."

He went back to the house. Clarke Capadine had slipped away in the direction Fayette took. Uncle Hank stayed a few minutes, till he saw that Hilda seemed to be herself again, then he mounted and rode away to his work.

But that evening, when Hilda came at bedtime to bid him good night, she looked so woe-begone, and her feet dragged so that he inquired:

"Not afraid to go upstairs alone, air you, Pettie? Been seeing any of them Skulkin' Door-imps lately?"

She shook her head.

"No—not much. That isn't it. Never mind."

"Or Barrel-tops?" Hank pursued cheerily. "You let me know if any of them come around—and I'll stave 'em in for you."

"The—the doll." She got out the two words, and could manage no more, but let them lie as they fell.

"Sure enough!" The old man caught her up in his arms and started for the stairs. "That doll-baby's still on your mind, ain't it? I know. Uncle Hank'll carry you up to bed." And on the way he whispered, "Never you mind, Pettie; there's got to be a trip to Forth Worth right soon—Forth Worth—a real big city; and I'll make sure your doll-baby comes back from there."

CHAPTER IV

THE DOLL

IN two weeks after that Hilda's father went to Fort Worth. Hank drove Charley to Mesquite. His last words, as he handed the valise up to his employer in the El Centro stage, were:

"And once more, Charley, whatever else you do, or don't do, for the love of mercy, don't forget to fetch a first-class doll for Pettie. I'd ruther see you fail to close the trade with the J. R. Company—I'd ruther you forgot the whole everlastin' outfit of supplies—than to have you come back without that there doll-baby. It's a dirty shame that we big, two-fisted, long-legged men haven't got the child a doll before this."

"All right, Pearsall; I'll not forget." Van Brunt shook the old man's hand, and the stage drove away.

Surely, now the beautiful doll was certain to come home! The evening Hank got back—and every evening afterward—Hilda crept up into his lap to explain to him, over and over, how golden its hair should be, and what pretty tan shoes and white kid hands it should have. Now that—to her mind—the homecoming of the doll was made certain, the tide of feeling which had been so long repressed was loosened. The little tongue ran freely, the great dark eyes glowed as she repeated to him:

"This long, Uncle Hank—just this long—bigger than any Maybelle had—see?" The small hands measured about fifteen inches of stature. "And blue eyes, I told him—like yours, Uncle Hank; not black, like mine and papa's."

Uncle Hank's admired blue eyes would dwell upon her with troubled gaze. He had done his best. He recalled that last admonition to Charley. But now, shrinking in mind at thought of the possibility of another disappointment for Hilda, but shirking the cruelty of hinting his dread to the child, he would say slowly:

"Um—honey—why, Fort Worth, you know—Fort Worth ain't New York. This here doll's liable to be not much of a looker—no such doll-baby as you had before you come out here to Texas. It might not even be as good as some of the Marchbanks girl's—"

She would interrupt him, declaring earnestly, "Oh, Uncle Hank, it's going to be very beautiful!"

But there came no word from Charley Van Brunt; it was as though Fort Worth had swallowed him up. He was to have been gone a week; it was two, and he had not returned. The ranch boss wrote again and again to the hotel where his employer was to stop; even Hilda, with Uncle Hank guiding her little brown fingers, struggled through a small, smudged sheet of hieroglyphics. And when it was well into the third week and there was no answer, the manager sent Shorty to Mesquite with a telegram prepared entreating an immediate reply. But he got none—no message of any kind returned to him from Fort Worth. Old Hank, smiling and cheerful, carried a very anxious heart.

At the end of four weeks Van Brunt came home; a gentleman—oh, most certainly a gentleman, always; never less than that—but looking strangely ill and out of countenance. He was much thinner than when he went away, and much less sunburnt, and he had forgotten most of the matters which had taken him to Fort Worth.

The child, who for days back had scouted contin-

ually the long box-elder avenue leading up from the main trail, met the buckboard far down below the big gate. Charley stopped the galloping ponies with an arm thrown out across the driver's hands, lifted the small courier and hugged her to his heart and kissed her.

"Did she think Daddy had just run away and left them all? Well, Daddy was very busy; he—he had such a lot of tiresome business." And, reaching down into his vest pocket, Van Brunt brought out and gave to Hilda a five-dollar gold piece.

In silence and in some apprehension she looked at the coin lying in her palm—as unavailable to her, as valueless in her eyes, as a yellow button. He had given it as though it were a precious thing, and Hilda just glimpsed the terrible suggestion that it might have been offered instead of a doll. No, no—that could not be—that was intolerable! She pushed the idea away from her as she sat so quiet-seeming to the careless eye, but in truth in such a tumult of choking emotion, upon her father's knee.

Shyly and unobserved, her glance explored the buckboard. There was nothing whatever in it but her father's valise; not a big valise, either; and her hopes and expectations dwindled. It would be a small doll; she saw that she must bring her desires down to that—and she did so. But she asserted passionately to herself that it was there—it was in the valise. No doll at all!—oh, it was impossible—it was not conceivable! She shrank in panic from the thought. Heaven would not permit such a cruel thing as that.

The house reached, the child stood about, in one obscure corner and another, watching, longing for the moment when the valise should be opened; amazed at the waste of time and talk, when the Important Things

of Life were waiting in that mysterious casket. During an embarrassed pause, her father's troubled eye caught sight of the little figure lingering in the doorway. He picked her up and lifted her high, demanding:

"What is it now, my small daughter? Is there something you want to know of father?"

This was a strange, an ominous sort of inquiry, and Hilda could barely choke out the words, "The doll," in such a whispering, flattened voice as failed to make its way across the short distance from her trembling lips to her father's ear, and he had to ask her over more than once.

His face fell, almost comically. A look of pain and shame flashed over it. It was plain (at least to everybody there except poor Hildegarde, who still clutched tightly a tiny shred of hope) that he had never thought of the matter since the moment of uttering his careless promise.

"Run away, Hilda," Miss Val began, peevishly. "Why do you bother about such a thing now—?" But Charley cut her short:

"Why, dear," his voice was husky as he set Hilda gently down, "I completely for—"

Hank Pearsall's eyes were watching her in deep concern. This was what he had dreaded. Now he shook his head warningly at his employer, over the little girl's, and interrupted in a significant tone:

"It's all right, honey, it'll be a-comin' along with the freight stuff, when—"

"No, Pearsall," broke in young Van Brunt, in fresh distress. "No, Pearsall, there aren't any things coming by freight. I—forgot 'em all completely. I'll get—"

It was too late. Hank could cover nothing now; the bitter truth was evident, even to Hilda's incre-

dulity, that there was no doll. Her father drew her to him, saying:

"There, there, dear, don't cry! Oh, Hildegarde, love, don't cry! I can't—" His face was white; he looked almost as though he were near to tears himself.

"No, papa—no, papa," she whispered, "no, papa, I won't cry"; then crept away to have her agony alone, in her own private nook, an unused room upstairs, where there finally fell upon her the kind sleep of exhaustion.

The affairs of the house went on; supper was served and passed. Charley asked uneasily of the child's whereabouts, and was diplomatically diverted by Uncle Hank.

Hilda suddenly opened her eyes upon the darkness. She slowly realized that it was night, and that she was lying dressed upon the lounge in the sitting-room. Somebody had taken off her shoes and tucked some covering over her. The strange feeling was upon her which people have when they go to sleep irregularly, at some unusual time and place, not dressed for bed.

At first she was dazed and remembered nothing of the afternoon's happenings; then her sorrow came rushing back upon her in a flood. But the aftermath of grief was tearless. Poor baby—she had wept the fountain dry.

Now, as she lay, inert, she could hear the murmur of voices. They were men's voices. Rising, strangely stiff and weary, she crawled across the dark hall and peered through the chink of an imperfectly closed door. The room into which she looked was the office, and the scene which met her wondering eyes was a curious one. There was that sewing-machine which the child's mother had purchased and prepared to take with her household supplies to the Texas ranch. Sit-

ting before it, and beneath the strong light of the hanging lamp, was Uncle Hank, in full cow-puncher regalia, just as he had come in from some urgent outside errand. The broad brim of his sombrero was swept directly off his face, to be out of the way; the grizzled curls lay on the collar of his rough blue flannel shirt, and his trousers were tucked into the tops of cowboy boots, whose high heels, armed with long-shanked spurs, clicked upon the treadles. His sinewy brown fingers were twisting a thread to induce it to go through the eye of the needle. Bending anxiously over him was her father, in smoking jacket and slippers. It was some moments before Hilda could view this scene with anything but incredulity, or believe it other than a dream.

About the feet of the men was a tremendous litter of things very strange to see in that place. There were yards of white muslin, and sheets of newspaper cut into queer shapes; on the floor a comforter—the pink silk one off the big front-room bed—ripped open and with its snowy cotton bulging out; a long-fleeced Angora goatskin that commonly lay in front of that same bed. As, wide-eyed and wondering, the child crouched silently at the door, the men were talking in low, guarded tones. Her father spoke first:

“Can you make it work, Pearsall? I don’t know what I did that was wrong, but it ran crooked and puckered, even before it broke the thread.”

“Uh-huh!” returned the old man softly. “She’s liable to buck a little at first; but if ye don’t spur her in the shoulder or fight her in the face, she’ll soon travel your gait. See?” For the machine had settled down to a steady purr. “Gimme somethin’ to sew—anything, to try it on.”

The child saw her father duck his sleek black head

to pick up a scrap from the floor. Then she heard his laughing voice:

"Pearsall, I believe those long-shanked spurs of yours are what tamed down this bucking sewing-machine. I didn't have mine on."

"Shucks!" murmured Hank deprecatingly, bending to unbuckle. "That beats my time! I plumb forgot them spurs. Don't blame ye a mite for laughing. That's an old cowpunch, every time. It's a wonder I didn't try to ride in here on a cutting pony, with my guns on, and what you call a 'lariat' swinging! Shucks!"

He removed his big hat, dropped the jingling spurs into its crown, and reaching far over laid it back on the desk.

"If I was in your place, Charley," he said over his shoulder, "or ruther, if I was a nice, polite gentleman like you, and owned a ranch—I wouldn't keep an old galoot for my ranch boss that didn't have manners enough to remember to take his spurs and sombrero off when he came into my office."

Charley's reply was only a smile and an expressive look.

The small watcher at the door gazed, still unable to entirely convince herself that she was really awake. Her father said presently, in a rather depressed voice:

"No, this wouldn't do—not near. We'll have to make a long improvement over it."

He took up something from the floor. Alas, this must indeed be a brownie dream—but what a dreadful version of it! That which her father held and looked dolefully at was an atomy—a thing in human form—of a livid, blue-white, like a leper, and of ghastly outline, warped where the ill-guided sewing machine had wavered in its line of stitching. The be-

ing had a small, narrow, cone of a head, a neck like a pipe-stem, and limbs, long, attenuated, and lumpy where they had been stuffed hard with cotton rammed home by the help of penhandles, in an attempt to round out the starved proportions.

The child looked at this specter in dismay. Truly, it did fall short of grace—even of decent seemliness. She was glad her father thought so. She should never be able to produce a grateful countenance or bring forth any satisfactory thanks for a scarecrow like that. He spoke now:

“If we fall down on this doll factory business—well, when we fall down, for I see that is what’s coming; I’ve already made a mess of mine, and I bet anything you like that you’re not going to do any better—when we’ve tried it out and find we can’t fetch it, what I want of you, Hank, is to tell her—promise her—”

“No more promises, Charley,” Uncle Hank said, stuffing away at something he held out of Hilda’s sight. “If you’re leaving it to me, I say either dance up with the doll for her birthday or don’t hurt the poor baby any worse than she’s been already hurt with promises.”

“Her birthday!” Hilda swallowed a sob at her father’s startled tone. “Hank—do you know I’d forgotten absolutely that to-morrow is the child’s birthday!”

Something warm came to the little watcher from the glance of Uncle Hank’s blue eyes as he looked up. He hadn’t forgotten it. She guessed now that when he was in the kitchen there with Missou’ so long, and she wasn’t allowed to come in, it must have been a birthday cake that was being baked. She tried to tell herself that this would make up for the lack of a doll. She wished Uncle Hank wouldn’t say that about promises—they were better than nothing—better, anyhow, than

having some such frightful thing as that which dangled from her father's hand offered to her as a doll. She was glad when he insisted rather desperately:

"But I say, Pearsall, you'll have to promise her one. She'll believe you. We can't get anything out of this that will fill the bill."

"Can't? Why, we've got everything to do it with, Charley. I've gentled this sewing-machine; here's white domestic, and cotton to stuff with, and all the need-cessary materials. As for a pattern, why, you've got me to go by, and I've got you, in the mere number and placing on of arms and legs and such."

He glanced at the object in Van Brunt's hands.

"I reckon you went mostly by me—in the—the—geography of that critter. Gosh! Charley, it's a plumb straddle-bug, and whopper-jawed at that! Now—here"—the sentences came out in sections, irregular fragments, through many pins and needles and other implements which Hank held in his mouth—"here—I have went by you. We've got to cut 'em tolerable fat, or they stuff too slim; I see that. That'n"—he chuckled softly—"that lean lizard's a Pearsall—and a Pearsall I don't want to acknowledge. But this is a pretty fair Van Brunt. She's most ready for clothes now."

"I'll bring some of my things," Van Brunt suggested, turning toward the door to his own room.

Hank looked dubious. "It's lady fixin's—flub-dubs—we want—fancy ke-didoes, ye know. Course, we can't wake up Miss Valeria to get 'em—but I don't suppose a man's riggin's would—"

"A man's riggin's!" echoed Van Brunt, laughing under his breath. "You don't know much, Hank. Just wait a minute!" and he was gone.

Hilda's already overburdened heart sank at the

thought of the morrow. That she should fail to offer some sort of gratitude for these well-meant efforts on her behalf never occurred to her. The awful gulf which yawns between a child's point of view and that of the grown-up gaped black at the seven-year-old's feet; yet she was loyally resolved to bridge it, when the time came, with such show of enthusiasm as she could muster.

Her father had gone through the further door. Uncle Hank had quit the motion of his elbow that she knew meant stuffing, and was threading a needle. He spoke softly to himself; he had a way of doing that; Hilda loved it.

"H'm—promises! Pettie got promised every time he went to Mesquite that she'd be brung such a doll as could be got there. It was forgot. It's been forgot this time. Any feller that promises her any more dolls from anywheres is bound to look to her like somebody that promises to brings dolls—and then forgets."

Poor Charley Van Brunt! The old man had another listener. He had come back, his hands full of stuff he was bringing to dress the doll, and he stopped in the door.

"You're right, Pearsall," he said soberly and Hilda didn't understand till she was older that queer thing he said afterward. "I've all my life been promising to bring home dolls to the people I love and who love me and depend on me—and forgetting. You know what I mean. If it wasn't dolls of some sort, then it would be dolls of another—repentance, reformation, amendment—all dressed up and shining. But I've always brought the valise home empty, haven't I?"

"Well—and if so, Charley—if so? No reason you shouldn't fly at it and make good right on the ground."

"All right," her father's tone was grave enough to mean a great deal more than the present enterprise; he spread out his color box and paints on the desk, made some further exclamation in a low tone, and went to work. There was silence in the office. Hilda knew that she ought to slip away. She was just going to do so when she saw Uncle Hank purse up his lips, look very fiercely at the needle which he was holding at a considerable distance from his face, finally thread it, and begin to speak, not to her father at all but to something he had evidently propped up on his end of the desk in front of him. It must be that product he had called "a pretty fair Van Brunt." Shaking a finger at it, he began to sew on some small white object, glancing occasionally over his spectacles toward the invisible doll, murmuring to her:

"Now, you set there, Miss—well, what is your blessed name?—Miss Bon Bon—Miss High Stepper—Miss Tip-Top—and mind how you shoot off your mouth to-morrow. Ye want to be mighty clear on one point, and that is that you came from Fort Worth. Pa was just saving a little surprise when he failed to mention you to Pettie to-day. You was right there in that grip of his'n all the time; so don't let me hear any remarks about a bronco sewing-machine, nor white domestic, nor Charley's paint-box, nor Uncle Hank's number forty sewing thread. Mind what I'm telling you, Miss Tip-Top; we don't want a word of and concerning the spare-room bed-comfort. Fort Worth's where you come from—Fort Worth; a-bringing the latest fashions in young-lady dolls; and Pettie's not to be told things."

Such discounting of her delight in the doll! It was a relief to her when, a moment later, her father raised his head to say:

"Look there, Pearsall—there are the petticoats and such like." Charley spread out handkerchiefs of exquisite linen cambric. "And this," unfurling a brocaded white satin muffler a yard or more square, "there's enough stuff in this for a frock." He put down several four-in-hand ties. "Those blue ones are exactly alike; enough of a kind to make the dolly a sash."

"Yes, that's right, Charley. I'll sew 'em together and press 'em out and rig her a surcingle of 'em. The Fort Worth doll was going to have a blue surcingle—a blue sash—I ricollect."

Suddenly Hank dropped the ties; a look of perplexity, almost of consternation, spread over his face.

"Great Scott, Charley! I've just this minute remembered—do you know that Pettie figured that doll was a-going to show up with white kid hands, and tan shoes on its feet—tan shoes! Now, how in time are we going to fix that?"

"I'll show you," whispered Van Brunt, as he once more hurried out of the room. He was back the next minute, with a pair of heavy tan driving gloves and a pair of white ones.

"Oh, fine, boy—scrumptious!" Uncle Hank's eyes fastened upon them with a pleased look. Then he hesitated, holding one of them up to note that it was fresh and new. "But these are mighty good gloves, Charley, to—"

"I hope to heaven they are!" cried Van Brunt, and his pale face reddened. "I hope they're good enough to make right a man's broken promise."

Uncle Hank said no more. One at each side of the desk, the two men worked for a time in silence, the watcher at the door drawing her breath softly lest it

betray her presence. Suddenly the elder man began to speak:

“Ye see, Charley, I was a widder’s boy—the oldest; and the mother she used to make doll-babies for the little chaps. I’ve set up of nights toward Christmas, before now, to work this-here sort of racket. But mammy and me, we couldn’t paint—nary one of us—not a bit. A lead-pencil or pen and ink; eyes and nose and mouth—laid out mighty flat and square, I’m bound to say—’twas all the face them dolls of ours ever got. The hair was generally ink, too. The best we could do in that line would be some onraveled tow rope. This here Miss High Stepper’s face and hair are simply the finest ever.”

As he spoke he moved aside a little, and Hilda caught her breath in a gasp of incredulous joy. What vision of delight was this Uncle Hank held forth, turning his head to look at it sidewise, half questioning, half pleased?

Muslin had furnished the ground tone for its delicate complexion. Charles Van Brunt, with the help of his color-box, had been placing thereon not the usual countenance of the store doll, but the roguish face of a gay little mischief. There was nothing tame in her sweetness. Heavily black-fringed blue eyes looked out at you with stimulating significance. The lips smiled saucily. The long-fleeced Angora goatpelt had yielded a head of streaming crinkled tresses, which (after an interview with the color-box) showed an adorable gamboge tint. Head and body were fairly proportioned and well-shaped; and small anatomical inaccuracies were more than compensated for by her *beaute du diable*.

“What’s the matter with that?” cried the young father boyishly. “Say, she’s a corker, Hank!”

But now a new thought came to Hilda, which made her drag her fascinated eyes resolutely from the beautiful, smiling water-color face. They wished her to know nothing of the doll—to be surprised. With a last doting glance which caressed its perfections, she moved noiselessly back across the dark hall and into the sitting-room, shivering but ecstatic; oh, how different a creature from the bereaved little soul who had crossed that room, leaden-footed, sore-hearted, but a few moments back! She drew her slim legs up deliciously under the warm covers that seemed to close about her like the very arms of love, and with a deep, deep sigh of perfect peace, relaxed her comforted spirit to sleep.

Silence enfolded the ranch house. All the little nocturnal sounds that noisy daylight blurs or blots out gradually became audible. Somebody walked across the upstairs hall in stockinged feet. There was a stamping among the ponies down at the corral. A little owl called sleepily from the willows over by the irrigating ditch.

Hours afterward, when she awakened—this time on her bed in her own room, whither she had been carried and undressed in that sound sleep—she found a radiant being perched upon a table beside her pillow.

Save for the presence of the doll herself, the child could never have believed but that the vision of last night was a dream. When later Uncle Hank explained to her, with her father's assistance, that the beautiful Fort Worth doll had only been withheld from her the day before because it was a surprise, she accepted the explanation with a look and manner singular even for Hilda. There was something exultant in the seven-year-old's bearing and in her thought. Her doll had a different origin from Maybelle Marchbanks',

or those that belonged to any other little girl in the world. Uncle Hank was not telling her the truth. It was not so, that her father had bought the doll. But her imaginative soul seized eagerly upon the spirit of the thing. All statements—and they were voluminous—concerning the importation and handling of Miss High Stepper (now Rose Marie) she understood to be figurative. This was not fact to which she was listening; it was poetry—parable; and she answered in parable of her own.

She kissed them both passionately, and hugged the pretty doll to her with tears and with laughter, dwelling ardently upon each personal beauty and each separate elegance of attire; the arch, expressive eyes, the dainty tan shoes—all from Fort Worth; that is to say, all found and purchased in, and brought to Hilda out of the blessed country of Love and Good Faith.

CHAPTER V.

POOR CHARLEY

HANK PEARSALL, used enough to the drinking that belongs with life in the western cattle country, the town outbreaks of hard-muscled cowpunchers who live under the open sky, watched with dismay the very different sort of drinking that his young employer indulged in.

After that miserable Fort Worth episode and the arrival of Rose Marie, things were never quite so bad again. Charley eased up on the trips to town, and to the hard-drinking ranches. The Sorrows was already so crippled, its resources so reduced that a day of reckoning must certainly be at hand; but Hank knew that no more land was being sold, no more big sums borrowed on mortgage. And again Van Brunt made spasmodic efforts to interest himself in the ranch work. To the old man at this time Charley had the pathetic charm of a repentant child. The entire household management had slipped into the boss's hands; Hank was but fifty-two, yet he seemed like an indulgent father with an incompetent son and his family in charge.

Hilda could read. She hardly remembered a time when she wasn't able to make a sense that satisfied her, anyhow, out of the words and letters under the pictures in her story books. She had a curious habit of looking at these and partly "making up" as she went along, entertaining herself with such tales as they suggested. At first, her father laughed at it; then, in his careless, haphazard way, tried a bit of teaching.

But this was a sort of work that took patience; it was easier to read aloud to the child; and so the lessons usually ended up that way. Uncle Hank, listening, gave the sober opinion that a child of Pettie's age "ought to have schooling."

"And I think I can manage it, Charley," he said to his employer. "They need a school in the neighborhood. There's eight or ten kids of the right age within riding distance."

"Go ahead, then, Pearsall. You've lived here—you know how to tackle the matter," Van Brunt answered easily.

So Uncle Hank got Capadine, McGregor, and three other ranches to "join in"; an adobe hut that, before the day of fences, had been a sign camp, was put in repair; an enthusiastic young woman brought out from Kansas; and what the cowpunchers instantly christened "Hank's Academy" was started with eight pupils. It was Pearsall himself who took Hilda over the first morning, and tenderly launched her on the tide of school life. After that, she rode alone on Papoose, the fat little red pony he had got for her. Hilda's school and Hilda's lessons became an important household interest.

Then came a time of roundups. Charley was still making efforts to be a ranchman. His help on the range might have been of questionable value, but at least Charley himself was getting moral and physical benefit from the riding.

Upon a morning that Hilda never forgot, the roundup was working a mile or so from the house and within sight of the school playground, a mere hard-trodden spot of plain outside the south window, where small feet had worn off the grass. She had begged to stay home from school and go with the Three Sorrows out-

fit. Her father would have allowed it, but Uncle Hank put in mildly:

“Best not, Pettie. I’d stay with the lessons while we got a teacher.”

She had teased and even pouted a little, so that Uncle Hank finally allowed that she might ask Miss Belle to be excused at morning recess. This request the teacher denied. They were having special work. In the cattle country, if you begin stopping school for roundups, education will fare ill. So she went out to the south of the house with the released, yelling children who were playing at roundups of their own, depressed and somewhat bitter, refusing to join when they roped at each other. She could see the cloud of dust that rose above the herd; she could just make out the smaller bunch that was “the cut,” held at a distance from the main herd; and riders swaying out to head galloping animals into it, moving swiftly like toy mechanisms. Her heart was hot with resentment. She ought to be there right now. Uncle Hank would let her ride old Paddy and help hold herd. She could be lots of use—Miss Belle didn’t know that.

She gave several longing glances to where Papoose was staked out, on the further side of the schoolhouse, and began to walk.

She kept on walking, her back to the school, her face to the roundup, until she was as near to the one as the other. When the bell rang to call the others in, she calculated that it was too late for her to get there in time—she might as well go on. She walked faster, and finally began to run.

It was a general roundup of everybody’s cattle. The C Bar C outfit was there, but Clarke Capadine was back at the schoolhouse, sitting on a bench, singing the multiplication table—they always had that after morning

recess. Kenny Tazewell, of the Quien Sabe—Kenny was big enough to help some, and his papa almost always let him come. But he also was slaving at the multiplication table. There would be no one to divide the glory of the roundup with her. She went forward more resolutely.

Uncle Hank was at the chuck wagon. He wasn't a bit surprised to see her.

"Miss Belle let ye off all right, did she?" he inquired casually, and Hilda didn't even have to answer, for he turned and hurried down to the branding pen where the men were laboring like demons to keep up with the cutters and handlers.

Papa didn't see her at all. He was changing horses over by the roped corral. She saw him get on the little gray. It always pranced most splendidly, but Uncle Hank had said it wasn't much of a cutting pony. She watched him mount and ride. She loved to see her father on horseback. He looked so beautiful, among the other men, it made her think of knights and tourneys. He fetched a half-circle around the cattle, out of her sight. She dropped down beside the chuck wagon and sat quite still. It would not be prudent to put herself forward just yet. As for to-morrow, and Miss Belle's explanations—after them, the deluge.

She knew the cook; it was Limpy Phillips of the C Bar C. He only made one or two derogatory remarks about children at roundups. When he was busy at his covered pots and Dutch ovens in their trench, she earned toleration by mutely handing him the thing he needed from the chuck wagon. At five minutes to twelve he straightened up and told her she might go tell her Uncle Hank that dinner was ready, and she better look sharp and mind that the whole blame herd didn't run over her and stamp her flatter'n a flapjack.

She got to the branding pen. Uncle Hank came to its bars. She was just about to give her message, when something in the old man's face stopped her. He was looking toward Shorty, who came galloping, a hand up, his mouth open. She knew Shorty must be calling, though in the din of the roundup she couldn't hear any word. Uncle Hank jumped the bars and ran toward the oncoming rider, and then she got the cowpuncher's voice.

"Pearsall—Charley's hurt."

With one motion Hank swung around, flung the reins over Buckskin's head, was on him and away. The two men galloped side by side. Hilda began to run. She had no memory of the cook's errand, no fear of the herd or the hard-driven horses. She ran desperately, blindly, till stopped by old Snake Thompson's voice and hand.

She was picked up as a big dog picks up a puppy. Old Snake had scooped her from the ground in the manner of a cowpuncher lifting a handkerchief in a display of fancy riding.

"Lookee here," he said with irrelevant wisdom, "children should be saw, not heard. What in time are you doing here?"

"My papa—he's hurt—"

"Where's he at?"

"Over there." She pointed. "Uncle Hank went—Shorty— Oh, hurry!"

Thompson began circling toward the other side of the herd, Hilda on the saddle in front of him. McGregor of the Cross K thundered up behind them.

"Is it Charley?" called Thompson.

"Yes." McGregor checked a little to explain, "Buster says he ran into an old cow—rode her down full tilt. Horse's neck's broke."

They suddenly rounded the shoulder of the herd, that mass of dark, bellowing, pawing life, with its restless hoofs and shaken horns, and came in sight of a group at a little distance from its edge, motionless, with a sense of arrest. Three men, four ponies, and something dark on the ground. Capadine came running toward them.

"How bad is it?" asked McGregor.

Capadine glanced toward Hilda.

"He's breathing."

Hilda heard the word while old Snake was lifting her down. Uncle Hank was kneeling by that something on the ground.

"Move back a little, boys. Don't crowd around him that-away," she heard him say. They opened out, and she caught sight of the still features, the closed eyes, of her father. As she looked, those eyes fluttered open, the head moved.

"That you, Pearsall?" came the whisper. "Get me home."

The ranch boss bent closer.

"Are you sufferin', Charley?" he asked.

"No," was the dubious response. "No, I'm not in pain."

"God!" groaned Snake under his breath; and McGregor dropped his head. Hilda wondered that they should be so dismayed. Surely it was good that father was not in pain.

Uncle Hank got to his feet. The eyes that had gazed so fearfully at Charley went keenly round the circle of faces. If he saw Hilda, he made no sign; but there was a sharp scrutiny for the horse that looked over each man's shoulder.

"Jeff—Buster—" he muttered under his breath, with a wavering return of his glance to the injured

man's face—"No. Mex, is that pony of yours fresh?"

"Yes, sir." The slim, wiry cowpuncher put an eager hand up on his blue roan's mane. "He'll do whatever you ask of him."

Charley's eyes had closed again. Hilda wanted very much to creep in closer to him, but dared not. Uncle Hank was doing everything.

"Pull straight for Mesquite," she heard him say to Mex. "Stop at the Lazy F for a fresh pony if that one gives out. You can get another at the Circle 99 company's, if you need it. If Doc. Elder ain't in Mesquite, nor anywhere in riding distance, and if anything's the matter that you can't get him, go on to El Centro for McClosky. Don't come back without a doctor. Have you got money?"

Hilda's eyes followed the motions of Buster and Jeff who were pulling the saddles from two ponies and unfolding the blankets. She heard McGregor offer to attend to the money for Mex and see to the Three Sorrows cattle in the roundup. Uncle Hank thanked him, and stooped once more to her father.

"Bring me them blankets now, boys," he said. "That's right—one over the other, that-away. Shorty—Jeff Allen—Bud McGregor," they were laying the blankets on the ground close beside her father. Uncle Hank looked around. "Jim—where's Jim Tazewell?" he asked. "Here, Jimmie; to this side. Kansas, you get acrost from him. Now, the six of you—slip your hands under him as far as you can and ease him onto the blankets."

They stooped, shouldering close. Hilda could see nothing but their backs. She felt a sick shutting-in at the heart as they lifted. Then came Uncle Hank's voice again.

"Did we hurt you, Charley?"

They were placed now, three on a side, ready to take up the blanket. Hilda could see her father. His eyes were still closed, but his lips shaped themselves into an unheard "No." Cautiously they stepped out on the mile trip to the ranch house. Hilda ran beside them, crouched a little, her hand out, not quite touching them. She moved like a young partridge, startled from cover, and out of her eyes fear looked. Over on the playground school was turning out. Thin and clear came the treble whoops, as soon as they had left the noise of the roundup sufficiently behind them. It was very strange to think that over there they didn't know; for them it was prisoner's base and the multiplication table, just as it had been this morning.

When the journey was little more than half done, the six bearers stepping with infinite care, Van Brunt began to groan aloud. Uncle Hank was walking at his head, watching his face.

"Where hurts you boy? Does it joggle past bearin'? Ought we put you down and rest you a spell?"

He failed to catch the whispered reply at first. The bearers halted, and he leaned closer.

"No." Van Brunt motioned feebly with his hand. "Get on, boys . . . I want to see the baby, before—"

The big fellows carrying the blanket moved ahead, stepping short, watching pitifully. Charley groaned outright at every stride now; Hilda, beside him, moaned, too. Her eyes were so blinded with crying that she did not see the ranch house when it came in sight. Going up the long, tree-lined avenue to the front door, Uncle Hank bent and spoke to her.

"Go in ahead, Pettie. Tell your aunt that your father's bad hurt, and we're bringing him."

Hilda had a sense of flying, of getting to the house at a single step. It happened that Aunt Val was just

coming down the stairs. Hilda cried out her communication as it had been given, and turned back to the bearers, who were toiling up the porch steps.

Miss Valeria moved uncertainly into the open door, got a glimpse of what lay in the blankets; her hands went up, she stumbled blindly, and Hank's arm caught her as she fell. He let her down on the hall couch. Charley went past them, carried for the last time into his own house.

"Pettie," Hank gave the direction over his shoulder, as he followed, "you run find some one to look after auntie."

Jose's wife was in the kitchen. Hilda caught at her skirts and dragged her toward the front hall, explaining as they went. She left the woman questioning, exclaiming, and flew to the living-room. They had shoved out the couch, and were raising the blankets high, so that the injured man could be laid gently down.

This done, they stood about him, seven tall, white-hatted, deep-voiced cowpunchers, afraid to move or speak lest their tones be too loud for sick-room pitch, the creaking of their boots offend. In the silence, the rustling of their big, virile bodies, in the strain of feeling, sounded plain. Something pushed against Hilda in the doorway. It was Burchie, in his soiled play-frock. She took his little grubby hand and led him forward to Uncle Hank. The old man lifted him.

"Charley," he said.

Van Brunt's eyes unclosed.

"The baby—here." A faint motion of his hand indicated a place on the couch. Hank set the child there, and he remained motionless as a small image, only the wondering, distressed blue eyes going from one face to another. Hilda crouched in an inconspicuous heap at the side of the bed, unnoticed; Burch's

little hand reached down and grasped the shoulder of her dress.

Van Brunt's dark head on the pillow moved a bit from side to side. Uncle Hank bent over to try to ease his position. She saw the look which flashed up into the old man's face as her father said:

"I've made an awful mess of it."

Uncle Hank shook his head.

"I've made beggars of these children."

Hilda hadn't been sure, till he said "these children" that he knew she was beside him.

"No, no, boy." Uncle Hank's eyes entreated, reassured. "You was new to the ranching business. We all make our mistakes."

"Ah!" breathed the dying man, "I've made nothing else."

He closed his eyes and was silent for a minute. Then he opened them once more with that tearing groan.

"Katie's children—what's to become of them?"

Hilda took heart to reach out a shaking little hand and touch his fingers. They were chill, but they closed upon hers strongly. She wanted to say that he was not to be troubled, but such things were for grown-ups. She looked about on the cowpunchers, Shorty holding hard to the edge of his chair, old Snake Thompson over by the window shaken by rigors of feeling. The sun was sending long arrows in through the slit of the silken curtain beyond the couch.

"Don't worry. You're a-going to be all right," came Hank's full, grave voice. "The doctor'll be here inside of twenty-four hours. You'll be all right."

"No," Van Brunt stopped him with a husky whisper. "I'm not going to live an hour. My children are orphans."

Plainly this tortured him more than bodily pain.

“Would it quiet your mind, Charley, if I was to promise to stick to 'em always, exactly as if they was my own?”

The great wave of relief that went over the white face on the pillow was sufficient answer, and Hilda looked to see her father get better at once; but what he said between labored breaths was:

“God bless you, Pearsall. I'm leaving nothing but debts—”

“'S all right, Charley—all right. They's a-plenty—I'll make it a-plenty. And God so deal with me as I deal by these children.”

It was like a solemn ceremony; the picture of it as such remained with Hilda in after life, vivid, ineffaceable. Her father on the bed, the sure knowledge of death in his eyes, Uncle Hank putting a brown hand over her own and Charley's, the cowpunchers standing about like witnesses to the pact.

When it was done the father kissed them both. Hilda thought he was going to say something as he looked at her, but he rolled his head painfully on the pillow and murmured instead:

“Take them out, now—take them away. Poor things—poor little things—I don't want them to remember—take them out, quick!”

They were hurried from the room. Shorty picked up Burch, and Bud McGregor led her. They were lingering forlornly outside the closed door when Uncle Hank opened it a few moments later, and said:

“You boys go with them to the bunk house.” He came fully into the hall and closed the door. “Hurry on with 'em—see about Miss Valeria as you go.”

And he turned back into Charley's room, to sit by the young fellow's couch while he passed in anguish

down into the Valley of the Shadow, to reassure him in moments of respite from pain, with promises that the mortgages should be paid off, the children have education and opportunities.

CHAPTER VI

A CHILD'S WORLD

HILDA sat on the floor in the hall, Burchie beside her. She was still a thin little thing; and though she had now come into the growing age—that period so called out of all the years it takes us to reach our full bulk and stature, eight-year-old Hilda had as yet not accomplished much of its work. She perched there with her slim legs drawn up so far that the pointed chin almost rested upon her knees. The gaze of the big, unwinking eyes was on the open doorway of the parlor.

A child's world is a strange place, not by any means the world of the adults about it. To the infant—viewing all matters from another point—a table is a serious and interesting piece of furniture, with things upon its top that you cannot see; a chair, a somewhat less doubtful structure, which you sometimes climb, if you can, thereafter to sit upon it with your insufficient legs dangling. To it—even to a child of Hilda's age—that which immediately surrounds it is life—is the world; the persons of its household and its social circle make up humanity; the laws it there meets seem to its feebleness fixed as those of the Medes and Persians. Thus or so say the customs or decide the grown-ups—the infallible ones; it is well or grievous, but you cannot help it; you have no influence, much less real power, to change or to defy.

To Hilda, sitting quietly there on the floor, the world was a great level plain, inhabited not so much

by mankind as by cattle. The capital of this realm was Home—not merely the Three Sorrows ranch-house as it had been in her father's time, but the kind of home that Uncle Hank meant when he promised that dying father that the children should always have one. There are persons who spread around them this atmosphere of security against the jars and offenses of life, of safe comfort amid its loneliness or hostility; rich, selfless natures that dispel, as a flower its perfume, the sense of home. Hank, tall, bearded, deep-voiced, so much man in all his attributes, yet carried it with him. He served it at the tail of a chuck wagon or in the one-night cow camp. One could even imagine him bringing it into the cold and unhopeful air of a palace.

“Yes, we've got debts to pay and obligations to meet, and it's goin' to be close work for a spell,” he had said to Miss Valeria, when he talked matters over with the helpless, dismayed woman. “But there's one thing sure, we're a-goin' to have a home for these children here in the meantime.”

His first move was to build the long-delayed mess-house for the boys; his next to send away for a good Chinese cook. Thus came to them Sam Kee, elderly, silent, with all the best traits of his race; Sam Kee who made a garden and raised such vegetables as had never been dreamed of on the ranch, who would lay aside his usual reserve and scold shrilly to get the right cows kept in the right pasture for the making of butter and cottage cheese. Sam Kee had become the corner stone of domestic comfort at the Sorrows, where now the little family ate alone, Uncle Hank at the foot of the table, Miss Valeria at the head, while the boys had a cook of their own.

To be sure there sat enthroned, away in Chicago or

Kansas City, a vague power known as The Price of Beef. Inexorable, unapproachable, arbitrary, it ruled this mortal life. To it all questions of improvement in one's material well-being were referred. By it all earthly hopes, all ambitions and vanities, stood or fell. You needed shoes or stockings? You longed for piano lessons, or you had set your fancy upon a pink sash or a certain picture book? Well, if beef were "up" you probably got—upon proper representation—the object of your desire. But if beef were "down"—then, in the matter of piano lessons, pink sash, or picture book, you did without; and so far as shoes and stockings were concerned, you just continued along with those you had. For Uncle Hank had made it plain to Hilda that the mark of all moral and mental inferiority—I had almost said degradation—was to sell beef when it was "down."

When Henry T. Pearsall was appointed guardian for the children of Charles Van Brunt, deceased, the administrator of their estate, when he entered upon the familiar task of making one dollar do the work of two, eking out money for the interest on mortgages, keeping things running until, as he phrased it, "he could sorter get his feet under him," this Price of Beef ruled him too.

But Miss Valeria Van Brunt had the strength of the weak, and Hilda heard with only a passing sort of surprise that Uncle Hank would, if necessary, even sell beef when it was down to send her and Burchie to Fort Worth. It seemed the crime was justifiable when something was the matter with your ears.

For after Charley was gone, the monotony and the crudeness of ranch life seemed finally to become unbearable to Miss Val. She came to Pearsall almost in tears, declaring that Burch had some sort of ailment

which affected his hearing and that he ought to have a specialist's care and treatment at a sanitarium. Uncle Hank was bewildered.

"Something the matter with the boy's hearing? What makes you think so, Miss Valery?"

"Oh, I'm quite sure of it. Mr. Pearsall, you must have noticed that he's not talking as he ought. When he wants anything, he just points to it. I have to make him speak."

"But when he does talk—it's all right. I never heard a young 'un of his age speak so plain, I believe."

"That's not the question. Mrs. Silcott says," she was quoting the lady from Ohio now, "that her cousin had a little boy—or maybe it was a little girl—who was just the same, and that they let it run on till nothing could be done. The hearing was actually lost. The child became deaf and—finally dumb. This must be attended to, Mr. Pearsall, and at once."

Uncle Hank gave the little lady a long, puzzled look. But no one could argue with Miss Valeria Van Brunt when her mind was made up; he had found that out. After a while he said slowly:

"Well, ma'am, I'll get the money together just as soon as I possibly can. If you feel that-away about it—I guess the money'll have to come."

Then he had added that statement about selling beef even though it were down. He didn't have to do it that time, because he got a good chance to make a trade with McGregor. Yet the fact remained that he would have. He would even have put a mortgage on—and a mortgage must be an exceedingly desperate undertaking, for he looked that way when he said it.

So Aunt Val and Burchie were to go to Fort Worth to a sanitarium there which some one had recommended. There had been great preparations in the

past weeks, clothing ordered from New York, and this afternoon Aunt Val was entertaining at tea some ladies from the C Bar C and the McGregor ranch. She had told Hilda that, for the occasion, she might put on Burchie one of the new suits that had arrived, adding:

“And do try to make yourself look nice, Hildegarde. I'm afraid you're a very untidy little girl. Wash carefully. Wash brother carefully, and pick out a new, plain dress—white linen will be best.”

Good thing Aunt Val asked for white linen. It was about the only frock Hilda had that would have passed muster, and Miss Valeria was just as apt to have suggested something that had been worn out and outgrown long ago. If Hilda could have got the words together to say it, her statement would have been that the mere surface of things made altogether too much difference to her aunt—that with her the serious question was, not what was inside your head, but how was the hair on that head combed and smoothed up, how well the face on its front, the ears that ornamented its sides, kept washed? Always and always the thing you said to Aunt Val was of much less importance than the way you said it.

Having listened to a jerky sermon as to what would be polite to say to the visiting ladies, Hilda had decided that silence was the wise policy, so she had retreated as far as the hall with Burchie. She might not speak, but she couldn't help hearing, and these tea-ing ladies—and in particular that friend of Mrs. Capadine's from Ohio—had offended her deeply. They sat in the parlor, while here in the hall she played with Burchie, rounding up for his amusement cattle of twigs in pastures marked off by the pattern on the rug. No doubt the ladies looked at her and thought her a good child. They would have been startled to know that

much of their talk was judged—and condemned—by the active brain beneath the damp, carefully smoothed down thatch of dark curls.

Burch refused to be interested in the roundup of twigs. He made one of his silent demands for the building blocks that he loved to set up and tear down, set up and tear down again. They were on the shelves on the other side of the living-room. As Hilda was slipping through to get them, her aunt stopped her.

“What is it, Hilda?”

“I only wanted to get Burchie’s blocks. He doesn’t care to play roundup.”

“And you do?” Stout Mrs. Capadine reached out a hand, and when Hilda stopped at her knee to say politely that she did, “Well, I expect you’ll be the ranchwoman of the family, then—a regular little cattle queen.”

“Uncle Hank’s already taught me to ride pretty well,” Hilda told her seriously. “I have to grow a little taller, and my arms have to be longer, before I can learn to rope.”

Once more back with Burchie and the play on the floor, she heard the Ohio lady caution, laughing:

“Take care. Little pitchers have long ears, you know.” And Mrs. Capadine lowered her voice away down when she next spoke.

“Well, when Mr. Capadine told me that Lee Marchbanks had applied for the guardianship of the children, I didn’t know but you’d asked him to act in that capacity, Miss Van Brunt; but I see that your arrangement with the present incumbent still stands.”

“Act in that capacity” was a little beyond Hilda. She had no doubt that Colonel Lee Marchbanks could do it; and “present incumbent” was surely something disagreeable; but her uneasy mind settled on the ques-

tion—what children the Colonel might wish to be guardian of.

“No,” Aunt Val was speaking in her most New York voice, very languid, “I didn’t write to Colonel Marchbanks; he wrote to me. This man Pearsall is—er—well-meaning, of course, but I can’t help feeling that an educated person, a gentleman, such as Colonel Marchbanks seems to be, might be a more fortunate selection.”

“This man Pearsall!” They were talking about Uncle Hank. Then the children they spoke of were herself and Burchie. Mechanically, Hilda pushed the blocks about to keep Burch quiet, listening with all her ears now, while in the room there the talk went from bad to worse, till finally Miss Valeria spoke of Uncle Hank as uncouth. Hilda hadn’t much idea as to what that might mean; but it sounded bad.

Justice was not to be had here; but there was a theater which she maintained in her child’s mind, where all these elbowing and shoving assertions and commands—often both vague and contradictory—that Aunt Val put on people were turned right around and Hilda’s own idea of fair play and human satisfaction had the say. She herself was the character that adorned and ruled that stage, but not in any such guise as Hilda’s friends would have recognized. This was a presence of lofty stature, and of a countenance and glance insupportable to evil-doers—a creature called forth by the helpless child fancy oftener than grown-ups suppose. For some reason whose explanation I will leave to others, it spoke always in shrill falsetto, that high sing-song which is the voice of the Chinese actor. But it never had to speak more than once. Not only people, but things and conditions, hustled to do its bidding.

In there—right back in that parlor—Aunt Val,

seated among her visiting ladies, had said that Uncle Hank used bad grammar! And the lady from Ohio had agreed that he was ignorant, though good-hearted. The big black eyes yet flashed; Hilda retired to her mental theater and hastily set its stage as the ranch-house parlor, dragging onto it Miss Val herself, the visiting ladies from their several ranches, and the pert outsider from Ohio. On chairs of unworthiness there she stuck the offenders. To them she saw enter this big, haughty, terrifying other self of hers. It came swishing through the room, about seven feet tall, irreproachably clean of countenance, teeth and finger-nails, with conquering eyes and a paralyzingly correct toilet. Often it never spoke at all; merely froze the guilty ones into silence with one glance as it passed; but this was a time for plain speaking.

Uncle Hank was not ignorant! Ignorant, yourself, Miss or Madam Ohio! Could it be possible that she, Hilda, alone of them all was aware that he knew more than anybody else in the world? Why, you starched-up lady with your gold spectacles and shiny slippers, it would need a lifetime's toil for you to come into half his stored wisdom concerning coyotes and why they howl; touching prairie dogs, wild mustangs, cactus, jack rabbits, trail-herds, boggy fords, relating to "when we were down on the Pecos," or "one spring on the Canadian," or, "when cows stampede." Uncle Hank was beautiful too. No one living had such eyes as those blue ones of his; his smile was as the very rays of the sun; his voice; his touch—! Hilda knew that sometimes children had to get along without relatives and without parents; but that any little girl could possibly face existence without some sort of Uncle Hank was beyond her powers of belief. Supposing that she—even in her own proper and insignificant person—

should lead these glib scoffers to Uncle Hank's trunk, lift the lid and show them where his Sunday suit lay? If that did not convict them of shallow judgments, surely the bottle of cologne would do the trick. It was imported, so Uncle Hank said; and to Hilda's thinking its possession was better than a patent of nobility.

Hilda's secret court of justice and the visit came to an end about the same time. The ladies, who never knew what they'd been through in the little girl's mind, came out into the hall; the buckboard that was to carry two of them, the ponies for the others, were at the door. Hilda rose, made her bow and said her good-bys in that queer, artificial tone that pleased her aunt. Burchie had stood solid on his two feet; not a word out of him; just a pink fist up, methodically wiping off kisses—and Aunt Val let him. She and the ladies even exchanged pitying glances over the top of his head. But Hilda knew that Burch heard all they said perfectly, and could have talked well enough if he'd wanted to—and surely Aunt Val knew it. Grown-ups—all but Uncle Hank—were dreadfully puzzling. Finally Hilda had led little brother away, given him his bread and milk, put him to bed, and now had come back to her evening perch on the door-stone where she always watched for Uncle Hank.

While she sat there turning over these recollections in her mind, the warm gold had faded to delicate ashes-of-roses. The light waned with infinite gentleness and tenderness. A great spirit of quietness sighed across the open land, enfolding the few tiny evening sounds that began to make themselves heard. Her mind wandered from the questions she was going to ask Uncle Hank. It was funny about those little brown owls that sit up at the mouths of prairie-dog holes; how they will turn their heads to watch you as you walk around them,

and keep right on turning, until, if you'd walk around them often enough, they would wring their little heads right off. Oh, yes, they will. Indeed and truly. Shorty had seen 'em, mor'n once.

A cooler air blew in from the southwest. The shine had gone from the window panes. A cricket chirped close at hand, and, without having consciously heard it, the child momentarily glanced that way. Then back to her vigil and her reflections.

It was funny about a dogie. It was funny, and it was sad, too, that a dogie—

Suddenly in the growing dimness, far out on the Ojo Bravo trail, a tiny speck began to vibrate. To the untutored gaze, it might well have been a jack-rabbit or a coyote, or even an idly cruising tumbleweed, but to the eyes that were watching it now, full of eager love, already deeply versed in plainscraft, that speck was instantly recognized as Uncle Hank on Buckskin. Aunt Val and the ladies who had been visiting her; the little brown owls who twisted off their own heads; the dogies, those forlorn orphans of the range, whose affairs had barely swum over the verge of her mental horizon—all were thrust headlong into the rag-bag of oblivion. The little feet struck the ground with a sharp spat; lightly as a blown feather Hilda was off, running down the trail.

That was approaching toward which the twenty-four hours so inevitably swung. The vibrating speck came nearer and nearer and resolved itself into a most knowing-looking buckskin pony carrying a tall man clad in the usual dress of the cowpuncher. Galloping horseman and running child continued to approach each other. They hailed simultaneously.

“Hi, Pettie!”

“Oh, Uncle Hank!”

Buckskin was checked; the grizzled head leaned far forward; one foot in its cowboy boot was lowered from the stirrup; Hilda's was planted on it; the small brown hand caught firmly in the big, strong one; and the child swung up in front of the old man. The pony, as he felt the additional weight settle into place, always started soberly on toward the ranch house.

The regular thing after that was for the two on Buckskin to bring forward the record of history from the point where it had been dropped—when they separated in the morning—to the present moment.

Questions and answers usually alternated. The day's happenings were tallied over. By one and by the other, possibilities were submitted and gravely passed upon, information volunteered, incidents recounted seriously, yet in tolerant and hopeful spirit, the tousled black head leaning against the blue flannel shirt. Hilda was the putter of questions. Uncle Hank the answerer, the source of all wisdom. This evening she was scarcely up and settled before she began:

"Uncle Hank, when papa died, did Fayette Marchbanks' papa want to be our guardian—Burchie's and mine?" She leaned her head back against the blue flannel shirt and tried to look at Uncle Hank over her forehead. His beard was a good deal in the way. She couldn't see much.

"Now who in time would 'a' told you anything about that?" He was out of patience—though not with her. It encouraged her to proceed.

"But he did?"

"I reckon he did, Pettie."

"But he can't—he can't ever—could he, Uncle Hank?"

"No!" Hilda loved Uncle Hank's voice when it was full and grave like that; it was so satisfying; it

settled things; it gave her little thrills all down her spine. He went on. "Your pa left you to me—in a manner of speaking. Plenty witnesses. I—"

"Oh, Uncle Hank, I'm a witness," a quick rush of tears in the black eyes. "I heard him say it, Uncle Hank. I heard you promise. It made me—" No use to begin that—she never could tell the old man how it made her feel toward him. So she finished softly, "I'm a witness."

"So you would be," Hank agreed. "But there was no need to call on you for that, Pettie. I did name it to Miss Valery when she come to me speaking of Lee Marchbanks having applied; I told her same as I told the judge when I took out my papers. It's nothing for a child like you to pester her little head about." But the mention of Aunt Val brought back all Hilda's bitterness.

"Well, I think it was mean for a man to want to do that—want to be our guardian, I mean—when you're it," she said.

"Sho! I wouldn't talk that-away about some one you never seen—nor me either, for that matter. It chances I've never laid eyes on Colonel Lee Marchbanks; but from what I hear, he's all right."

"Well, he's Fayette Marchbanks' papa, and I don't like Fayette a bit. Fayette said the Three Sorrows ranch belonged to him—if he had his rights. Is that the reason his papa wanted to be our guardian?"

"Now see here, don't you fix up a story and fit it onto the other feller without by-your-leave. That ain't fair. I expect Lee Marchbanks does wish his first wife's father hadn't sold the Sorrers out of the family, but too much thinkin' about what the other feller's thinkin' has made a lot of trouble in this world before now. Let it go at what he *done*. And he done no

more than to ask appointment as gardeeen—and I guess he had your Aunt Val's permission for that. You couldn't understand the ins and outs of it now."

"Mrs. Capadine said he wanted control of the property—what's control, Uncle Hank? And she said it was natural. I don't think she ought to have said that. And they all talked about minor children, the estates being wasted before they came of age. Is a ranch an estate, Uncle Hank? What's of age—am I of age?"

Hank chuckled and shook the thin little shoulder softly. "You've asked me so many questions I ain't a-goin' to answer nary one of them," he said. "Them ladies were talking general and wide-flung, Pettie. They don't mean to throw off on your Uncle Hank none."

But Hilda knew of something that was not general and wide-flung, that applied directly to him.

"What does uncouth, mean, Uncle Hank?" she asked.

"Now, you ask me what I can tell you," he returned genially. "That there was a great word with my mother, back in the Tennessee Mountains. When we young 'uns rampaged about so far, she'd use it on us. If we raced up to the table and commenced filling our mouths too full before we got good settled in our chairs, she'd tell us not to be uncouth and make us lay down knife and fork and set for a spell."

"I wish you'd do that way, too, Uncle Hank. You just correct me if I'm ever uncouth. I'm sure *you* never are."

Hilda thought she was very diplomatic to put it that way, but she was a little startled to feel the broad blue-flannel chest against which her head leaned lifted by a silent chuckle, and to have Uncle Hank echo:

"Uncouth—I bet your Aunt Valery thinks so—and

says so! Why not? Way I talk must sound heathenish to a New York lady."

"Well, I like the way you talk," the little girl held to her point.

"That's right," Hank agreed. "You like it—for me; don't you foller it. You're to grow up a nice lady, and talk dictionary, like your Aunt Valery does. When you folks first come here, I tried to brush up a little; when your pa left you to me, I shore thought I'd straighten up my language; but it couldn't be did. I've gave it up. I've done gave it up. I'd look a bigger fool trying to talk New York fashion than what I do using the lingo that I was raised on and learned in six weeks of an Old Field Hollerin' school back in the Tennessee mountains. A hollerin' school?" as Hilda looked puzzled. "We-e-ell, some calls it a yelpin' school. It's a school where all the young 'uns sits on benches and hollers their lessons. The school teacher—be it man or woman—walks up and down between them benches to see that the scholars mind their books, and don't leave off studying; and the feller that hollers his lesson loudest is the best scholar—see, honey? That's what it is."

"I should think it would make an awful noise, Uncle Hank."

"It does, that. You can hear one of them yelpin' schools for nigh a mile."

"But—I should think you couldn't learn anything—on account of the noise," the little girl went on.

"You got to learn," Hank said. "Teacher cuffs you side o' the head if you don't. You can get used to most any way of doing things, Pettie. I got as far as long division, in the cipherin', and read 'way into the Bible—taking all the hard words as they come. Then my pa died off, of lung fever,—pneumonia they call it now

—and I had to go home and run the farm for my mother. We hadn't got to grammer yet. Don't know if the teacher knew it himself. So you see that left me with just the English language to use, and after I come to Texas I picked up the Texas language that a man uses workin' cattle."

"Well, you can run a ranch 'most better than anybody, and Shorty and all the boys say so."

"Yes, your Uncle Hank can run a ranch."

"Well—you can teach me that—you can teach me to run a ranch."

"Why, yes. Reckon I can."

"Well, I can ride some now, can't I? And I'm not afraid—very bad—any more. I'm going to be lots of help to you, Uncle Hank, aren't I?"

"Lots of help," the man repeated softly.

"When Aunt Val goes to Fort Worth, there'll be just you and me to run the Three Sorrows ranch, won't there? And you'll teach me all the time—"

"Outside of school and your books, Pettie. Outside of them, we'll be full pardners. You and me'll run this ranch." And he swung her down on the doorstone.

CHAPTER VII

THE NORTHER

SO Hilda, alone at the ranch with Uncle Hank, Sam Kee in the kitchen, the cowboys out in their own place, came up to the first Christmas since her father's death. There'd been Christmas cards from Aunt Val and Burchie, at the Sanitarium, and some talk of their trying to be at the Three Sorrows for the week; but in the end Miss Valeria sent a blue silk party dress for her niece, and a letter saying she could not risk having Burch exposed to changes of weather at this time. There was a Miss Wingfield, of Kentucky, in the Sanitarium, who played a very fair game of cribbage. She had found some rather good society in Fort Worth itself—and so on, and so on.

Uncle Hank puckered his lips as though he might be going to whistle when they unpacked the expensive-looking little frock, so utterly unsuited to any of Hilda's uses or needs. And when they came to try it on, they found it too tight in some places and too big in others. Miss Valeria's letter said, just as she would have said it if she had been there, that, since she didn't have Hilda's measurements, there might be changes to be made, but that a local seamstress could probably attend to it.

"Well," said Uncle Hank doubtfully, "there's a Mrs. Johnnie DeLisle at Mesquite that's a cracker-jack at sewing—sewing and cutting out things. I reckon Miss Valeria would call her a seamstress. She ain't very local—not to us. We'll have to go sixty

miles to her. But as we was going in to-morrow—weather permitting—to do a—er—a little Christmas buying, why we can take it along, and have her fix it.”

They were to start before sunrise and make the trip in one day. He sent Hilda off to bed early; and twice before going to bed himself stepped from the front door to study the weather. They drove away in the buckboard next morning in the dark after a hasty breakfast; Hilda had never seen him push the ponies so. Neither of them seemed in a humor for talking; she was sure Uncle Hank was worried—or anyhow he was absent-minded, and Hilda had absorbing affairs of her own to think of. She carried in a little pasteboard box one carefully saved whole quarter, two silver dimes and seven pennies, that were to buy at Brann’s store the finest necktie to be had for Uncle Hank’s Christmas present. She couldn’t trust any of the boys to get the exact shade of Uncle Hank’s blue eyes. She must select it herself. And Uncle Hank had finally agreed to take her.

The air seemed very still. The thud-thud of the ponies’ hoofs sounded dull. When it was time for the sun to come up, things just got a little lighter; the gray began to turn blue. Suddenly Uncle Hank spoke, looking down at her, still pushing his team hard.

“Better get your other coat out of your war-bag, honey.”

Hilda couldn’t trust the situation to words. She drew from under the seat a very small bundle, opened it and showed that the largest and heaviest garment it contained was a cambric nightgown.

“Pettie! Is that all you took for a trip like this? Where’s the big bundle I saw Sam Kee toting down the stairs just before we left? I thought that was your coat and things.” She shook her head.

"I guess that was the washing, Uncle Hank," she faltered. "I guess he was just taking it into the kitchen. He said he'd get it done while we were gone, don't you remember?"

"Mm," the old man murmured noncommittally. "And that's all you've got? And I let you come out like that?"

"Well—it was kind of warm this morning." Hilda defended them both. "And I didn't think about the big coat. I'm not c-cold, now, Uncle Hank—hardly a bit," and she tried not to shiver.

It was a curious, wild, beautiful day. Up there in the north everything was a clear, strange, wicked blue, out of which there began now a keen, steady wind. Over in the east, to their right, the sun was just a blurry pink spot in the heavens.

"I'd never have come out like this—I'd have seen to things myself—if I hadn't been sort of troubled in my mind," said Uncle Hank. "But that's no excuse." He looked down at her. "Not cold? Why, Uncle Hank's baby's just about perished! We've got a blue norther—just as I was afraid—and it'll blow for three days. If you had your coat, I'd turn round and go straight back home. But you can't travel in that little jacket in a norther. I'll cut in here to the left; see—" as he turned into a side trail—"it puts our backs to the wind. We'll stop at the Bar Thirteen; you remember, honey, the Reynolds and MacQueen ranch. Frosty MacQueen, he's that staving big feller with the tow-colored hair. You seen him at the last roundup on our place—" He checked suddenly.

Hilda shook her head. She didn't remember any one at that roundup which ended so tragically. Hank glanced sideways at her, and went on in a cheerful, commonplace tone:

“He’s sort of a joker—Frosty is. Calls hisself
‘Frosty MacQueen
Of the Bar Thirteen.’ ”

“Oh!” Hilda’s big eyes danced. “That rimes—
doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Uncle Hank agreed. “And if any one takes
notice of it riming that-a-way, Frosty’ll say, ‘I was a
poet—and didn’t know it.’ He aims to be funny.”

Hilda’s mother had always read poetry to her; she
knew a great deal of it by heart, and used to love to
go about sort of saying it under her breath, or even
with closed lips letting it say itself in her head. Since
she’d come to Texas and planned to grow up and be
Uncle Hank’s partner and a ranchwoman, she some-
times wondered if she ought to do this. And too, out
here the plains, the sky, the movements on these two
of the morning and evening which made day and night,
also set her to stringing words together. Sometimes
these rimed, and then it would give her a thrill that
was almost painful. There was nobody to tell about
it. Aunt Val, even when she was there, would only
have told her to run away and not interrupt when a
person was reading, and Burchie was too little. So it
had made itself into a secret; and when a thing does
that it pretty soon gets to be seeming like something
wrong. Now, here was this Frosty MacQueen, a
grown man, owner of a ranch, and it seemed he was
allowed to make rimes without loss of social stand-
ing. She plucked up sudden courage and asked:

“Uncle Hank—did you know I could write poetry?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me a bit if you could.” The old
man was busy with his team, getting over a bit of a
gully. She watched close to see whether he was pleased
or displeased with her statement, but could make noth-
ing of him. As he seemed not to be going any further

with the subject, she was obliged to take it up again herself, an effort that gave a little too much force to her statement:

"But I won't—if you'd rather I wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?" They were going smoothly now without further attention, as she went on:

"I love it, in the books, too; and maybe—at nights, and times when you're resting—but you know I intend to learn to ride and—and grow up to be a real ranch-woman and your right hand. Do you think I could do that and write poetry too?"

"Sure, Pettie. Why not? Lots o' good riders and such write poetry. I've knowed boys that sung it to the cattle, riding night herd. You go ahead; if you grow up along of me, you're bound to grow up a rancher; that's all there is to be, around here. I couldn't help you none in the poetry business; but you can read me any of your little pieces that you've wrote, any time you want to. I expect they're fine."

"Oh, Uncle Hank, I will!" in a flutter of embarrassment and delight. "But I haven't got any very good ones—yet. If you don't think it's foolish—I will write a nice one out for you."

Pearsall was looking keenly ahead.

"Like as not neither of the boys at home," he said. "But Frosty's been pesterin' me to bring you along some time to see his white cat, Lily. He's plumb foolish about Lily; says she's all the family he's got, that she has more sense than some humans. Lily'll be at home, anyhow."

"I'm almost glad the norther come," Hilda murmured.

Hank drove on a moment in silence, then he said:

"Pettie, I ain't sure and certain of myself in this here grammer range; but from what I can make out

from the brands and ear-marks, that there word ought to be 'came'—not 'come.' ”

The child looked at him wide-eyed with amazement. “Why, Uncle Hank, you—you say—” she faltered.

“Yes, Pettie, yes, honey—you’ve got me there,” slowly shaking his head. “You see an old cowpuncher like me—never had no schooling to speak of—I sure do say a sight of unproper words. That’s one place where it ain’t a-going to do for you to follow your Uncle Hank—Pettie, I can’t lead. Cattle ranching—that’s one thing I know, forward or backward; but that there grammer trail’s a plumb blind one to me. You’ll have to quit me there, and learn one of your own. I’ll always try to provide the right party to scout it out and blaze it for you. Never mind my flinging my rope at ‘come’ and ‘came’ and such. Ask Miss Belle about ’em when you go back to school after Christmas. She knows. That’s what she’s here for. And when you get so you can ride with the grammer pretty stiddy, why I’ll just tail on the best I can. That’s how you and me’ll work it, Pettie—that’s the way we’ll operate this here proposition.”

With his free hand he reached over and pulled the blankets up around the child, exclaiming:

“I thought so! Here she comes.”

And with the ponies at a long steady lope they drove the last quarter mile to the door of the little Bar Thirteen shack in an ever-thickening cloud of snow that came steadily out of the north on that strong wind.

“Ain’t no smoke,” muttered Hank, peering at the shanty through whirling flakes. “Hop out, Pettie! Hop out, honey, and skalarrup right into the house, while I put the ponies up. Jest make yourself to home till I get there.”

When, a few moments later, the old man came into the small front room, after stamping the snow from his high boots, he found the child standing forlornly in the middle of it.

"They've likely went to town for Christmas," he said. "But that don't make no difference to us; we'll mighty soon have things humming here."

He hung up his big white cowboy hat, hustled off Hilda's snow-soaked outer garments, and came back from a foraging expedition with a small blanket, in which he wrapped her, tucking her into a comfortable chair.

"Now you're done up like a papoose," he laughed. "Can't move none in that there *serape*. You just set and watch your Uncle Hank while he shows you how folks make theirselves to home in Texas when they come to see you—and you ain't there."

Soon fires were roaring gayly in both the kitchen and front-room stoves, a can of tomatoes was opened, a can of corn beside it; the odor of brewing coffee floated pleasantly through the house; condensed milk, butter,—all that goes to make a cozy meal was brought out. A lamp was lit—as the darkness thickened—the table spread, and they ate their supper.

Hilda could not get the great white cat to stay with her. Lily came in and welcomed them sedately; then, in spite of all Hilda's petting, offering of diluted condensed milk and other dainties, she walked away with the air of a hostess who feels her duty complete.

"Leave her go," said Uncle Hank easily. "You can gentle her to-morrow. We'll be right here for three days."

"I keep on being almost glad," Hilda said. "It's like a desert island—sort of. And the plain out there is the sea. If it had happened on the way back, and

I'd had—er—something I wanted to get in Mesquite, I think Christmas here would be lots of fun.”

“Ye-ah. So do I, Pettie.” The old man spoke absently from a small wall cupboard, where he was pushing aside a home-made checkerboard with buttons for checkers, several incomplete and very dirty packs of cards, that had made many a solitaire in long lonesome evenings, and Frosty's extra supply of tobacco. “If I had—” His voice trailed off. His plans had not been so exact as Hilda's, but he had expected to fill a small stocking to overflowing with what he could buy at Brann's store; and now there was nothing to “do with,” as he himself would have put it, but whatever he could find in or about the Bar Thirteen shack. He sighed a little, then turned with a smile to drop another stick of mesquite wood into the little air-tight stove. He surveyed the bright, warm room, while outside the norther had its own way on the naked plain. “Comfortable! Why, we're just a-suffering with comfort, you and me—ain't we, honey?”

CHAPTER VIII

A CHRISTMAS VALENTINE

THAT night Hilda slept soundly in big Frosty MacQueen's bed. And all through the dark hours snow came down on that long slant from the north, so that it coated that side of the house. It froze, thawed a little, and froze again; morning found a sparkling glare, almost like thin ice, all over the snowy crust on which the flakes had ceased to fall. The sun was shining; it was very beautiful, but bitter cold—not the kind of day to go out in. Like a great knife the wind raked the gleaming levels; it played with the dust of dry snow; it tried at the doors and windows of the shack, rattling them loudly. It made what was inside them seem all the more secure and cheerful by contrast.

A curious preoccupation had taken hold of these two castaways. They wandered about the house, and didn't look at each other. Hilda's coins burned in her pocket. Uncle Hank seemed to be vaguely looking for something.

"From his gal, I reckon," was the comment brought out by a small bonbon box full of much-read letters. "No, they ain't likely to be a thing on the place that Pettie would care for." But anyhow he could cook. And so, soon after the noon meal, he barricaded himself in the kitchen, telling Hilda to occupy herself with such amusements as could be found in the parlor—"like a lady." She agreed, promptly and without comment. She had important plans of her own afoot. It

never occurred to her that she could take the liberty of presenting her Uncle Hank with anything that belonged to Frosty MacQueen. She dived instantly and eagerly into her own inner consciousness and personal belongings. The small bundle was unrolled and looked over.

The desperate plan of slashing right into one of the breadths of that blue silk dress to make a necktie for Uncle Hank wasn't given up because Hilda would have grudged the sacrifice, only for lack of proper needles and thread. Frosty had a "housewife," but the needle-book in it contained nothing but darners, some wicked three-cornered affairs for sewing leather—Hilda cut a finger on one of them and respectfully let them alone after that—and one short, fat needle almost as big as a darner. As for thread, there was some number eight, black, and some number thirty, white, and a mass of darning cotton. Did all Frosty's sewing consist of darning and sewing on buttons? It looked like it. The cambric of her nightgown would have furnished pocket-handkerchiefs—of a sort—but again, she couldn't hem handkerchiefs without fine thread and needle. Beyond this was a tooth-brush, a comb, an extra hair ribbon of faded complexion, and a little red Russian-leather note-book with her father's name upon it.

This last brought the happy inspiration. She would write Uncle Hank a Christmas valentine—the combination was her own invention. Since the spirit of the gift must be all, she would freight it with that love which sometimes seemed to swell almost too big for her heart to hold, and hint delicately at something more material that would come later, when she could get in to Mesquite.

The last words of this composition were labored

out in the dusk, and Hilda rose with a start to light her lamp and finish her preparations. There was no sound from the kitchen, but a most delicious odor oozed through a crack of the door. "Stay there, Pettie!" sounded Uncle Hank's voice as she took the first step toward his part of the house. "I put you a lamp and matches on the table before I quit ye this afternoon. Is your fire all right? Are you—er—are you a-having a good time, honey?" solicitously. "I'll open the door pretty soon."

"No—don't! I can light the lamp myself, Uncle Hank. Yes—oh, yes, I'm having a fine time. I'm busy—don't open the door."

A satisfied chuckle from behind the panels reached the child as she went back to the little stand and her Christmas valentine. She had carried her work to the window to have the last faint daylight upon it. Now, as she approached the pane, lamp in hand, two great eyes like balls of fire glared in at her from the snowy outside. She had just presence of mind to thrust her papers into the stand drawer as she turned back, crying out for Uncle Hank—for, beyond the first pair of fiery eyeballs, she had made out shadowy forms and yet more and more burning eyes!

The old man threw the door open with a bang, letting in a whiff of aromatic sweetness, and she plunged at him, clutching his shoulders with her little brown hands, hiding her face against his rough flannel shirt.

"Oh! Uncle Hank—the eyes—the eyes—glaring at me!" she cried.

"What!" his tone was hearty as he good humoredly shook her a little. "Not whiffenpoofs again—right here with Uncle Hank—and a good light and all?"

“Oh, no, no! Like panthers or—or wolves. You look—out the window, there.”

Hank glanced across the shivering little figure crouching in his arms to the window, and at once understood. The cheerful shine from the small ranch-house windows, sending messages of comfort out over the snow-covered levels, had attracted the unhappy cattle, whose only food—the short, rich plains grass—was covered deep in snow. It was their eyeballs which glared so.

“It’s just poor, hungrey cows, honey. The lamp-light makes their eyes shine that-a-way. They’ve went without supper—and without breakfast and dinner, too, I reckon. A winter in this here cattle country is sure a-going to wring a man’s heart, if he’s got any.”

“Oh,” said Hilda. She ran to the window now and looked out at the ring of glaring eyes. She caught her breath. “Uncle Hank—it’s Christmas,” she said pitifully, and gazed up into his face, pulling at his hand.

“I know, honey—I know,” he said, soothingly. “But these here Bar Thirteen folks out there hain’t hung up no stockings—and we ain’t Sandy Claus. Wish we had a stack of hay for ’em—though like enough the drinking tank is froze over, and they’re more thirsty than hungry.”

“Oh, Uncle Hank,” Hilda pleaded, “do be Santa Claus, and I’ll be Kris Kringle. Let’s go out and rake the snow off that little haystack by the corral and let the bars down! Do let’s give the cows a Christmas tree!”

There was a fizz of something “boiling over,” and a sudden blast of steam that smelled heavenly from the kitchen. Hank hurried to quiet matters. A moment later Hilda heard him stamping into his tall boots.

"All right!" he called. "I'll see what I can do for them Bar Thirteens."

"But me too—me too, Uncle Hank!" insisted Hilda, running after him. "If I'm going to be a ranchwoman I'll have to know what to do about northers—and—everything." Her hand was on the knob of the door between living-room and kitchen, when Uncle Hank's voice stopped her.

"Stay there! Whoop! Hi—hi—hi—don't come no further, honey girl! I'll be with ye in a minute! Yes, you can go if I can wrap you up sufficient."

Hilda backed, coughing with excited laughter, from the communicating door. And a few minutes later there followed the old man across the snow in the moonlight a queer figure—a little girl with a pair of Frosty MacQueen's heavy woolen socks pulled on over her shoes and stockings, a man's corduroy coat reaching to her skirt edge, its sleeves hanging six or eight inches below her little paws like the sleeves of ancient Russian boyars, a woolen comforter tied over head and neck, a hoe grasped valiantly in one hand, and a long string of pathetically hopeful Bar Thirteen cows trailing after.

The snow was raked from the small stack of coarse Laguna hay; but the old cattleman had been right, the cows were too thirsty to eat. They nosed it and turned away, muttering, to mumble at the snow. Uncle Hank knew in the stillness, and without any light, that Hilda's big black eyes were filling, and she was struggling with sobs.

"All right," he spoke out cheerily, shouldering his axe; "now we'll get a right good drink for 'em; an' it's turning off so warm that the tank ain't likely to freeze again this trip."

With a queer sound that might have been a cough,

a sob, or a chuckle, the child grasped his hand, and together they hurried around the tank, where the old man, addressing himself vigorously to the task, soon had the thick ice which covered it broken up until only one great cake rode in the middle. Then he set Hilda—who was laughing joyously as she looked on and applauded—across the tank from him, provided with a long pole to push the big ice-cake toward him, and smashed it also. The poor thirsty cattle, who had followed trustingly close at their heels, crowded up to drink; and when Santa Claus and Kris Kringle reached the ranch-house door they could look back and see the happy Bar Thirteens clustered around their Christmas tree, “taking off the presents,” as Hilda said. “And, oh, Uncle Hank,” squeezing his hand hard between her two little ones, “isn’t it—just—beautiful!”

Supper found the little kitchen bare of any object suspicious to the eye (even the eye very, very big, very black, and preposterously keen, of eight years old), but in the air still hung a noble aroma, and Lily, the white cat, paced up and down, mewing now and then, rubbing against old Hank’s legs, and stopping to sniff most indelicately at the pantry door.

Hilda giggled—or would it be more exact to say that a giggle rippled its way from the little girl’s abashed and apologetic throat—when the old man spoke reproachfully:

“You, Lily! I’m plumb outdone with you. Don’t I tell you they ain’t no mice in there—leastways none that you could ketch?”

The meal went off amid a sort of eccentric joviality, which was liable to blossom into open hilarity with no particular cause apparent; indeed, joy bubbled so hard that there seemed perpetual danger of a wholesale eruption.

"'Spect you better go to bed right soon," the old man cautioned. "And don't forget to hang up a good long stocking."

"Why, Uncle Hank, do you believe Santa Claus can get down a stove pipe?" gurgled Hilda in an ecstasy of delight.

"Sure!" replied the old man gravely, but with twinkling eye. "He knows many a way to get in where the stocking is—that draws him, as you might say."

Together they unearthed from big Frosty MacQueen's kit an amazing and Brobdingnagian pair of golf hose. "These was sure made for this business," murmured Hank in chuckling enjoyment, as he gazed upon them. He helped the little girl fasten one of the great, gayly plaided things to the wall behind the stove, all the time muttering delighted comments upon their size and the cheerfulness of their color scheme.

"Well, now, you hang up the other one for your own self," suddenly urged Hilda, though she looked a little doubtfully at its capaciousness.

"Huh?" exclaimed the old man, facing around upon her. "Don't you reckon Sandy Claus would get sort of mixed up by me being at the Bar Thirteen, when I ought, speaking proper and by the book to be at Mesquite—or to home at the Three Sorrers ranch house?"

Hilda shook her head. "He won't get mixed up about you any more than he will about me," she argued, with lips that tried hard not to break into laughter.

"Well—now!" he murmured, pinning up the second stocking beside the first. "I—er—mm—" He trailed off into silence; but it could not last long. Something must say itself. "I take that mighty kind in Sandy Claus," thumping his thumb briskly and never knowing

it. "It's right gentlemanly of him to spend the whole day fixing for—ouch!" suddenly realizing the pounded thumb—"I mean, you know, for him to go a-loping all over the Texas Panhandle hunting for me. If Sandy Claus wasn't most generally understood to be a man—a little old fat man—I'd say it was plumb sweet of him."

Well, well! Then to bed! It had been a busy day. The sharp tussle with the cows' Christmas tree in the frosty air had left the little girl ready for deep, dreamless sleep, and it seemed but a moment after she had shut her eyes, when she heard Uncle Hank calling from the kitchen:

"Better get up and 'tend to that stocking, or it might take legs and walk away!"

She was out of bed with one bound. There was a good fire; and behind the roaring stove hung a stocking that bulged and—yes, and twitched! As she looked, a small three-cornered white ear, pink-lined and furry, came in view above the hem. Its mate followed; and then two round bright eyes with an utterly adorable slant, as a sleepy white kitten looked out and yawned at her.

She slipped into her dress, then cried: "It's alive! It's a kitten—a real, live, human kitten! Oh, come and see it, Uncle Hank!"

Thus invited, the old man gently pushed open the kitchen door and sat down upon its step to share her happiness.

"Oh, it's like a swan's-down kitten—so white! Did it snow down, Uncle Hank? Oh, isn't it lovely and dear?"

"Why, Sandy Claus brought him," corrected the old man. Then, coming down to plain facts, he added, reassuringly, "Frosty said you could have your pick.

There's two others; one is a sorrel and one a pinto. I judged you'd like this one the best."

The kitten, as though it thought poorly of these revelations, gave a tiny sneezelike "Whszt!" which set Hilda to laughing, and at this the gay little atom, pretending to be angry, backed off and, like a boxer, began to make passes at the corner of her coat.

"He's a high-spirited kitten, all right," commented Uncle Hank, watching them with a smile. "But there's more live stock in that stocking—leastways more things with legs."

Gently Hilda pulled the stocking from its nail, put in a cautious hand and began drawing out fat gingerbread animals.

"Oh—a pony!" she cried. "And the gingerbread is just the color of Shorty's Gold-dust sorrel!"

"It's just as well Shorty can't hear you—and see that thing," chuckled Uncle Hank. "I take no pride in that nag. He was a tricky, deceivin' critter, Pettie; looked well enough in the dough, but, come to bake him, he sort of drew up in the legs like he was spavined."

"Oh, but this dear little jack-rabbit!" Hilda went on with her investigations.

The old man watched her a moment silently; then, as she made no correction of her statement, "That there was aimed for a burro," he said mildly. "You can't always go by the long ears. Look at the pack on his back."

"Oh, yes—the pack!" cried Hilda eagerly. "Why, of course!" She had taken the pack for the hump of a rabbit!

There were now hauled out of the great stocking, one after another, a coyote, whose color helped along the illusion, and whom Hilda, grown more cautious, did not call anything till she had artfully induced Uncle

Hank to classify him; a cow, which Uncle Hank willingly, even a bit hastily, named, adding in an apologetic tone, "Them horns—no, them there—them's its horns—swelled something ridiculous in the baking!" Then there was really a jack-rabbit (about the cow's own size, and much resembling her), some mice, and a flock of fat little yellow ducks, made by knotting a string of dough, flattening one end for the tail, and bunching the other for the head. These looked so good that Hilda suddenly became conscious of her lack of breakfast. Down in the toe of the stocking was a small jar filled with that which had yesterday spread such maddening odors abroad and had fizzled and boiled over—a most marvelous, a truly heavenly soft taffy, all juicy and moist with chopped prunes.

"Oh," she said, concluding her investigations with a sigh of rapture, "you've made me a lovelier Christmas than as if we had got in to Mesquite. Now, Uncle Hank, look in yours."

"Reckon I better?" he debated, glancing doubtfully at the lank stocking. "Sometimes Sandy Claus gets stalled in the snow, and you don't get your gift till some days after Christmas. I've knowed it to happen in the Tennessee mountains, and I ain't going to hold it against him if that's the case this time."

"But it isn't—it isn't!" cried Hilda, with very bright eyes.

The enterprising kitten ran up Hilda's chair at a rush, tumbled into her lap and began nibbling at a gingerbread duck. Uncle Hank crossed the floor in two big strides and thrust his hand deep into the swinging stocking. He drew out the small red book. As he stood and looked down at the name upon it, his tanned weather-beaten face softened beautifully.

"Charley's book, God bless him—poor boy!" he

said, hardly above his breath. He looked at her, not seeing her, his gaze—full of pitying love—fixed on things a short way back on Hilda's and his own life trail. "The little book Charley always packed. Charley's baby was bound to see that Uncle Hank was remembered." He turned it in gentle fingers. Against one inside cover was a pocket, and in it lay a length of tinsel ribbon, such as comes about bolts of muslin; a baby picture of Hilda's self, a bit of Charley's dark, curling hair, a pressed flower—treasures of a lonely child—and with them a folded paper.

"Open it!" Hilda couldn't restrain herself. "It's just a valentine—a Christmas valentine—Uncle Hank; but I want you to keep the book, and—and you said I could be a ranchwoman—and write poetry at nights and while I'm resting."

She had worked with her own red-and-blue pencil and Frosty McQueen's violet ink to put a vine around the page by way of border. The blossoms of this stem were botanically erratic, but they would commend themselves to Uncle Hank's partial eyes. A red bird plumed itself in the upper right-hand corner of the sheet, supported by a blue fowl on the left. The little girl had written in her large, clear, childish hand between:

My Uncle Hank
I wish to thank
For all he teaches me.
To ride and rope
And soon I hope
A ranchwoman to be.

The "Sorrows" fair,
Shall be our care,

Where we shall tend the kine.
There through the years
Of hopes and fears
I'll be your valentine.

"Kine are cattle—in poetry—you know, Uncle Hank," she explained hastily, as she saw he had finished the verses. "And I put in a note to tell why I had to give it to you now, instead of on Valentine day."

He turned the sheet and found:

"TO MY DEAR UNCLE HANK:

"This is a Valentine only it is Christmas you know and I have nothing to give you but my love because the Necktie is at Mesquite and it Snows. But you will understand and I can get it then.

"Your loving little girl,

"HILDEGARDE RENSSLAER VAN BRUNT."

With misty eyes, the old man was reading: "Nothing to give you but love . . . but you will understand . . ." He folded the sheet together, and bent to kiss the upraised childish face.

"Nothin' but love—why, Pettie, that's a gift to fill the whole—wide—world!"

CHAPTER IX

STOCKINGS AND SHOES

SPRING came along while Aunt Val and Burchie were in Fort Worth.

Think of it—think of being away when that happened! Hilda wouldn't have missed it for anything. For she knew that this country of the Staked Plain played a yearly prank. Throughout the long, dry summer it hid beneath the soft green-brown that clothes its mighty levels, dreaming delicate mist of dream, that showed to mortal eyes as mirage. In winter, it lay under the great reaches of snow. But on some magically determined day in spring, when you were not thinking of anything in particular, it suddenly burst out upon you and shouted, "Booh!"

"Booh!" cried the Texas plains of Lame Jones County (a place supposed by the foolishly learned to be a dry, windswept, featureless waste, almost desert) in a great voice that had no sound, and seemed to come from everywhere at once. And you looked about and said, "Why, you almost scared me!" You looked a long time and then you said, "How beautiful you are—oh, how beautiful! Where have you been all year?" "Right here!" laughed the Texas plain. Its laugh was green, oh, green with pure joy, radiant with incredible stretches of blue and rose and gold—wild hollyhocks, cactus blooms, phlox—nodding, dancing in the April breeze.

Hilda was getting along without any knowledge of cities, except the London or New York of romance, or the Bagdad that came into a fairy tale. She'd

never even been to Mesquite, for she and Uncle Hank turned back from the Bar Thirteen after that Christmas blizzard, and the old man found plenty of work on the Sorrows to keep him there. But who would ask for more? Her world was bounded by the great pastures that stretched out and away to the horizon; the foreground of existence was made up of the daily small happenings at school or around headquarters, as the low, rambling stone house was called. Visitors here were few and far between; the people of her home world were Sam Kee in the kitchen, the cow-punchers over at the bunk house, with Shorty O'Meara, Buster, Missou' and Old Snake Thompson for prominent citizens and Uncle Hank for kindly ruler.

Sam Kee let her mix up things sometimes in his big clean kitchen. She propped Rose Marie beside her in a chair and read to the doll; or she drifted about the house murmuring verses or speeches from her favorite stories. Oh, she was happy at the ranch, with Uncle Hank—she sometimes felt guilty that she didn't miss Aunt Val, or Burchie—or even her father—at all. Her mother's memory was getting to be a dim thing, like a beautiful sweet dream that you tried to call back in the morning—and couldn't.

When Uncle Hank shook his head a little once or twice and said he was afraid she was sort of running wild, she knew what he meant, but she didn't tell him. It was her "personal appearance," as Miss Belle had called it when she spoke to her on the matter. The truth is, it was getting harder and harder for Hilda to make herself neat for school. She looked at the great acres of hollyhock, phlox and daisies and wished that a little girl could just grow dresses as they did. There had been a big supply of clothing provided by

her mother: so many linens, such a number of gingham, and the heavier frocks in proportion. In Aunt Val's time Hilda just picked out whatever she thought she'd like to wear and put it on. There was never any trouble about it then, only sometimes if she went down stairs in the morning wearing a little lace frock with ribbons and the open-work stockings and slippers that belonged to it, Aunt Val would send her back to her room again to put on something "more suitable." But now, even Aunt Val was gone, and pretty much everything that had traveled to Texas in the big trunk was worn out, soiled, torn or getting too small for her.

She was growing to be a tall girl—"leggy" Shorty said, and Uncle Hank shook his head at him for the word. But there couldn't be any doubt about it—her legs were getting longer. Sam Kee said the same thing when she complained that he must have shrunk the skirts of her dresses in the wash.

"No! No slink in wash." He looked at her severely out of his slant black eyes. "Skirt no slunk. You stetch. You legs stetch fas' now."

"Well; I can't help it." Hilda had been on the point of tears.

"No wanchee help." The Chinaman grinned amiably. "Mebbe pu' soon be big leddy. Heh! Sam Kee feed you plenty good glub—thass why. You tell Uncle Hankie. He buy you dress plenty big."

Hilda sighed, and looked enviously at Captain Snow, the white kitten, a fine half-grown cat now, in high favor with Sam Kee, who said that "pu' soon now he ketchy lat." Captain Snow's coat grew right along with him, and was laundered where it was, in calm leisure moments. How much better!

Upstairs, strewed about on the chairs and tables of

a disused bedroom, were the discarded fineries Miss Val had left—splendid to play princess in; but they didn't offer anything for a decent "personal appearance" at school. And the matter of stockings and shoes absolutely stumped Hilda. You couldn't pin them together, or let them out. You just couldn't make feet that had got too large go into shoes that stayed the same size. Finally, in desperation, she brought out a pair of French-heeled, beaded slippers of black satin that had pinched even Miss Val's small foot, and were therefore thrown aside little worn. These could be held on with a string tied around the instep and ankle. And a pile of Miss Valeria's worn-out silk hose began to furnish the stockings. Hilda made this do for school; at home she took to going barefoot.

She did not follow Sam Kee's suggestion that Uncle Hank be bothered with any of these troubles. Aunt Val and Burchie there in Fort Worth were costing him an awful lot of money. There were mortgages. Hilda didn't know what a mortgage was, but when she asked Shorty he said it was something that ate money and spit fire. Hilda understood this to be more or less figurative. But anyhow, if Uncle Hank had mortgages to deal with, she wouldn't add the worry of her clothes. Besides, she was getting along pretty well now that it was warm weather. She did just love to go barefoot.

So she was barefoot when she ran, one hot Saturday afternoon, down the long box elder avenue, and turned eastward, going after some milkweed pods she had seen the day before growing in a place where the trail came in from the Ojo Bravo. She was playing Persian Princess, and needed some of the lovely silvery-white pompoms that could be made from these

Pods. It was a good way off where the weeds grew, but she didn't stop to get her pony. Maybe one of the boys, or even Uncle Hank, would be coming in—it was getting toward supper time—and give her a ride home behind him.

And sure enough, as she came within sight of the milkweeds, there was Uncle Hank on Buckskin, loping in from Ojo Bravo way. She left the trail and made for the weeds, running faster now, to get the pods and be ready by the time he came up with her. She was just reaching out to pick them—they had to be taken off carefully, or they would open out and all blow away like dandelion balls—when Uncle Hank's big voice roared out at her, from where he had pulled up Buckskin:

“Stop!”

Hilda stopped, fairly frozen. Never had Uncle Hank spoken to her like that before. She stood there like a well-trained pointer dog, rigid in the attitude of running.

“Stand. Don't move—for your life. I'm a-going to shoot!”

A hideous moment, then a noise that seemed to Hilda to split the sky, and send the earth reeling. Uncle Hank leaped from his pony and was running toward her. He had her now. She was lying back over his left arm, while the pistol in his right hand cracked again.

“Uncle Hank's baby! Did he scare her most to death? You ain't hurt, Pettie. Look. See what it was I killed.”

She opened unwilling eyes, first at the clouds that still ran circles above her in the blue sky; then she saw Uncle Hank's eyes, almost as blue, and full of the same fathomless kindness.

“Over there by the milkweed you was goin’ for—look, Pettie.”

And now she held herself erect a moment, and saw the brown, rusty coil, the shattered diamond-shaped head, of the rattlesnake Uncle Hank had shot. She hid her face against the blue flannel sleeve and trembled.

It was afterward—after he’d gone over to make sure the snake was dead—when she could get her breath easily again, and was climbing up on Buckskin with him, that the old man, looking down at the little foot set on his boot-toe, whispered:

“Barefoot!”

They rode a moment in tremulous silence, then he said sternly, “Never let that happen again, Pettie. You wear your shoes.”

“I love to go barefoot.”

“Pettie,” he turned and looked at her, “I don’t like that. Your pa’s daughter ought to be brought up a lady. She ain’t got no place in the barefoot brigade. You mind what I say about the shoes. Keep ’em on.”

“All day? In the house?”

“D’ruther you would,” and he swung her down at the ranch house door.

No more was said of the matter. But at supper time, it was with the feeling of a martyr that Hilda came creeping down stairs stockinged and shod—after a fashion. She paraded around in front of Uncle Hank while they waited for the meal, but he paid no attention other than to remark cheerfully that he had two men’s work to do to-morrow—if it was Sunday—and didn’t she want to take one of them off his hands. Sitting at table during the meal, Hilda had no chance to give Uncle Hank an object lesson in the superiority of bare feet over ill-fitting shoes. If

he got away from her and off to bed, she'd not have a chance till next day.

"Anybody seen that left glove of mine?" he asked, when he finally pushed back from the table. "I had it in here to mend, and I reckon Sam Kee must a-put it away for me where I can't find it. Run ask him, Pettie."

Hilda ran. As she came ostentatiously hobbling back, the glove in her hand, Hank failed to take it. Thank goodness, at last he was looking at her feet.

"What you got on, child?"

"Shoes—like you told me to," said Hilda, sadly. "Or slippers, rather."

"Slippers?" He eyed with disfavor the shabby glories of Miss Valeria's cast-off footwear, the toothpick toes, the preposterous heels. "Slippers, heh? Well, you just go and pull 'em off—and don't you ever put 'em on again."

"Oh, may I, Uncle Hank? I wanted to ask you if I could—in the house. But I thought after I promised—"

She was half way to the door when he called after her: "You take them things off and put some sensible shoes on."

She turned, and said in a weak voice:

"These are all I've got, Uncle Hank."

"All you've got?" He picked her up and carried her to the lamplight as though she'd been a doll, examining the footgear. "Who in time would buy shoes like that for a child?"

"They weren't bought for me," Hilda had to admit. "They're some old ones of Aunt Val's."

"Why don't you wear your own?"

"My own are all worn out—and—and I can't get my foot in any of them."

For a minute Hilda thought Uncle Hank was very angry at her.

"Gimme them things off your feet," he said, and set her down.

She handed the slippers to him. He took them, walked out through the kitchen calling to Sam Kee to bring a light. At the chopping block in the side yard, with the Chinaman holding his lamp high in the door, Hilda peering under an elbow, Hank caught up an ax and chopped off the French heels.

"There," he grunted, pounding down nails, looking the slippers over before he brought them to her, "put 'em on, honey—they'll do till to-morrow." Then he raised his voice in a shout and called across to the bunk house:

"Hi—some of you boys! Shorty, that you? Tell Thomps to take charge up at the big pasture in the morning. I'll not be there. I'm going to Mesquite."

When he came back into the room with Hilda, he asked:

"Didn't Auntie get you any shoes when she ordered all them things from New York?"

"No. She just got clothes for Burchie—to go to Fort Worth, you know. I guess she got him shoes. Mine weren't so bad then." She sat down and thrust out her feet to put the reformed slippers on. The old man stared at those feet and frowned.

"Are those your best stockings, Pettie?"

"Well, these are a pair of my every-day ones," Hilda said slowly.

"You put on your best ones, then."

"But the best ones are a lot worser—about having holes in the feet, if that's what you mean, Uncle Hank. I keep them for best because they've got the holes mostly where they don't show."

The old man held out a hand for the stockings which she pulled off and gave to him. He stood with one drawn over his big fist, shaking his head.

"Pettie, these stockings ain't got any holes in the foot," he said unexpectedly, and she saw that his eyes were twinkling. "Ain't any feet to 'em to have holes in. All that's left where feet was is just a bunch of fringe. You bring me the best you've got, and I'll show you how my ma used to foot stockings sometimes for us children back in the Tennessee mountains."

Hilda brought the best of Miss Valeria's silk stockings. The lamp was trimmed, turned high, Uncle Hank's spectacles were got out and adjusted—which was almost a ceremony in itself—and he opened the big housewife that contained his needles and thread and a queer steel thimble open at the end. He sighed a bit over the coarseness of his implements and the fineness of the material he was to work on.

"Ain't got no heavier ones than these, have ye, Pettie?" he asked, and when she shook her head, "Oh, well—it'll never be seen on a galloping hoss, and that's sure what you are these days, honey."

The stockings were spread out evenly, their tatters cut away, a foot formed on exactly the pattern you may find in some woven stockings, a good new sole cut from the stoutest part of another stocking sewed in. The leg was seamed down to a reasonable fit for Hilda, and finally the job was complete.

"There," Hank laid his scissors by. "Might stand you in hand to know how to do that right—if you should ever have it to do, Pettie. My mother held that a woman that would fix over a stocking by just sewing it into a kind of a bag, with no real shaped foot, as I've seen done, was a slommick."

"Oh, I'll fix over all the rest of them, Uncle Hank, now that you've showed me the way. I can do it. I'll take pattern by these," she looked fondly at the neatly folded pair lying on the table. "I won't just sew them up into bags and be a slommick."

Through her mind drifted the vision of what a slommick might be like—a slidey creature, of the most slatternly, reprehensible "personal appearance," and with a sort of elongated head, trailing hands that fumbled whatever they touched, dropped things and left them lying. Yes, as Shorty would say, she "savvied slommick, all right."

"You'll not have to fix any more of 'em, this time," said Hank with decision. "I'm going to Mesquite to-morrow."

"Oh, Uncle Hank—and you'll get me some stockings? Maybe two pairs? I can do with two pairs—and these that you've fixed over so beautifully. Or"—suddenly remembering the money-eating, fire-spitting mortgages—"maybe I could get along with only one new pair."

He smiled a little, and said:

"Have to have new shoes, too. And I bet you need frocks, and other things. Uh-huh, I see you do," as he caught her eye. All of 'em have to be tried on, so's they'll fit. Nothing for it but to take you in with me."

"Oh, Uncle Hank—is beef up?" Hilda asked breathlessly, and he laughed out.

"Does happen to be up, honey. Also, I wouldn't have to sell a steer to git you what you need. But if I did, and beef was down to half price—and it would take the price of a herd—I'd sell. Uncle Hank's little girl needs a new set of harness, complete—and she's going to have it, too."

CHAPTER X

THE CARRIAGE

AFTER that visit to Mesquite there was never any reason for complaint of Hilda's neatness at school. The Mrs. Johnnie, that Uncle Hank had thought might be classed as a "local seamstress," had made up the stuff they took her into plenty of dresses and undergarments, while as to stockings and shoes, now when she ran out of an evening to ride with Uncle Hank she had on such as even a rattlesnake might respect.

These rides in of an evening, on the front of Uncle Hank's saddle, with Buckskin going very slowly and soberly, were still the times best worth while out of all the day. Hilda always came primed with her day's news, small happenings about the ranch or at school. But there arrived an evening when she burst forth somewhat incoherently, and quite breathlessly, while she was yet climbing on the boot-toe.

"We can get it—can't we, Uncle Hank?"

"I 'spect so," the old man agreed, looking down into the flushed, eager little face as he hauled her up cautiously into his arms. Then he added, as a casual afterthought, "Get what, Pettie?"

"Oh—I forgot you didn't know." Hilda squirmed herself into a comfortable position. "Clarkie Capadine says the Three C's is going to try. Kennie Tazewell, he says it's every fellow for himself. And so we can get it—you just now said we could."

She sat astride the high-pommeled saddle in front

of the old man, her head against his chest. He smiled and slipped his left hand under the pointed chin.

"What you think you're talking about, honey?" he inquired.

Hilda tipped her head back further and glanced briefly up at him.

"The carriage," she said. "Clarkie told us about it at recess. It's got sea springs—sea springs, like waves, Uncle Hank." (The small brown hands paddled about in the air to piece out a vocabulary that failed to undulate in the required luxurious manner.) "Sea springs, and 'the best of material everywhere in its construction.'" (Smooth going here on a direct quotation from some manufacturer's catalogue.)

"Honey," said Hank with a little drop in his tone, "I'd love to buy a carriage for the Sorrows—land knows, we need it, with the ambulance a staggering cripple like it is—one leg broke, an arm in a sling, both eyes blacked and an ear chawed off—but we ain't got the money. You see, Capadine's fixed differently, Pettie. He could buy a carriage for his folks any day."

Hilda had hung in rapt silence upon that fascinating description of the ambulance, a characterization whose every feature she recognized perfectly; but now she broke in:

"Oh, I didn't mean to buy a carriage! We're going to win it—over at Dawn—at the fair—it's the prize for the roping match."

"Hold on a minute." Hank tightened one arm around her, and with the other reached down into the mail sack where, after some fumbling, he brought out a folded handbill. "Seems to me I saw something of that sort in here," he said.

Within the last few months, Lame Jones County had been organized; it had now a county seat of its

own, in the little new cow-town of Dawn, much nearer to the Three Sorrows than Mesquite; they were celebrating with a county fair, with all the usual cattle country contests and the approved cattle country prizes.

The sheet was unfolded in front of them both. Hilda instantly began to read: "The Committee will spare no pains—" while Hank was running a finger slowly down the line of prizes offered. It was well that Buckskin knew the way, for he got no more guidance.

The traveling forefinger reached the prize offered the successful contestant in the roping match. Hank's bearded lips moved:

"M-m-m, 'cushions and cover genu-wine leather,'" he muttered. "You was about right, Pettie."

"Well, then, we can get it, can't we?" she reiterated her demand as he let her down carefully by one hand at the doorstone.

"Why, you see, Pettie, it's a prize; and I don't know for sure yet whether we're prize-winners or not."

"Yes—course it's a prize." Hilda looked up at him impatiently, fairly dancing where she stood. "That's what I told you at first. For the best roper. And Shorty's the best roper."

"Yes," assented Hank thoughtfully. "Shorty's pretty good."

"Uncle Hank! Shorty's the best roper in Lame Jones County—bar none—if old Snake does say it. And Shorty's ours."

The old man looked at the great black eyes, glowing with excitement, the flushed cheeks, the parted, tremulous lips; and he sighed a little.

"All right, sister. We'll do the best we can; but don't let it get in the way of your supper."

"I won't, Uncle Hank." Hilda shook her head earnestly. She was answering words he hadn't spoken; she understood quite as well as though he had said aloud, "And don't talk any more about it to-night," and she assured him again, "I won't."

He rode away to the corral to put up Buckskin, and Hilda hurried upstairs. He hadn't laid a command upon her; but she answered to what she knew to be his wish with a zealous and adorned obedience: clean frock, smoothly combed curls, perfectly cleaned finger nails, a composed countenance. When she had accomplished all this she flew downstairs to watch for his return from the corral. She hastened the serving of the supper, giving Sam Kee to understand by means of a hint so broad that it was almost a fib that Uncle Hank was already in the house.

He arrived at last and went straight to his room, to wash up. Hilda nearly burst with impatience before he finally came down, the crinkled black-and-silver hair smooth and damp, the whole man soberly spick and span. They sat opposite each other at the dining-table, from which many leaves had been taken out to make it a suitable size for two, as they had so often sat before, served by the Chinaman. They talked as usual, but the thing they did not mention was, as ever in such cases, biggest in the conversation.

"Don't wiggle your feet so much, Pettie. And eat that fine, juicy beefsteak. Your Uncle Hank fetched that quarter of beef all the way from the C Bar C especially so his little girl could have nice fresh steak, and Sam's broiled it just right."

"I will, Uncle Hank," and Hilda made a violent attack on her portion of steak. She kept the letter of the law. She never mentioned the carriage in words;

but it pretty nearly wheeled out of her eyes every time she looked at Uncle Hank—and he saw it. She came nearest to breaking silence on the forbidden subject when at last he got up from the table and said, with a touch of embarrassment, that he must go over to the bunk house and see the boys about some work for tomorrow. Hilda did not ask to go along, as she often did; she only said:

“All right, Uncle Hank,” and added suddenly, “Aunt Val and Burchie will be here in time.”

Hank asked no questions and made no comments. He just took his hat and went, after a somewhat lengthened and considering survey of her.

She had not meant to follow. But the moment the door closed, her feet walked her very softly and very quickly after him. The tall old man strode along the path that led from the side door, around the corner of Sam Kee's vegetable garden, and in the dusk Hilda's little figure flitted from bush to bush, behind him. She halted quite a distance away, at the last bush that was big enough to hide her, and there she gazed and listened, fascinated. Uncle Hank stood at the edge of the porch, talking to one of the boys. He didn't speak very loud.

“Carriage” was the first word she got; then, “There's some things that ought to be did, and there's some things that just has to be did.” His grammar alone would have assured Hilda that he was very much in earnest, as he finished, “This here's one of the kind that has to be did.”

She saw Shorty squared up before Uncle Hank, half sheepish, half puzzled.

“Er—I was thinking of trying for that silver trimmed sombrero they offer for the best gentleman rider.” The lamp shine from inside showed him grin-

ning broadly. "You know I sure can ride pretty when I try."

"Ride pretty!" grunted old Snake, leaning in the doorway. "I ain't never seen it. I'll allow you can rope a little."

"Well," cut in Hank, "it's come right down to this: Charley's buckboard is a wreck. It just can't be drove no more. The ambulance is all we've got to take Miss Val and the kiddies out in, and it's not very much better."

"That's so," agreed Thompson.

"We'll see Charley's children hoofing it, or riding broncos," Uncle Hank said severely, "unless something's did pretty quick."

"You want me to rope for the carriage?" Apparently Shorty began to understand.

"I reckon you can wear your old hat another season," Snake jeered.

Hank turned and sat down on the top step, and Hilda, afraid that he would see her, backed off into the friendly darkness where the talk came to her only in broken scraps. She could tell that they were planning the campaign. Shorty said he would catch up his crack roping pony, Pardner, and grain feed him; he would go over his rope and entire equipment, and be in training for the match from this day forth.

Of course he would. They always did practice for the contests, even when they were the best ropers in Lame Jones County—bar none. She wasn't much interested in hearing them go over the names of those who, they were sure, would enter for the roping match. Shorty said Lee Romero was about the only one of the lot that he was much afraid of. Lee was with the Matador ranch this year, and known to be out after that carriage for them. In the dark Hilda smiled, all

to herself. Lee was one of the Romero relatives of Maybelle and Fayette Marchbanks. Let him be out after the carriage for the Matador—Shorty would win it for the Three Sorrows. Bubbling with triumph, she slipped back to the house and up to her own room. She undressed without lighting her lamp. All that night the new carriage glided and sparkled through her dreams.

Two days later Miss Valeria and Burch came home. No word of the wonderful new enterprise that was afoot was said to Aunt Val—Hilda knew better than that—but on the first day, the instant breakfast was swallowed, Hilda had her little brother out at the *asequia*, a favorite play place, and told him all about the carriage they were going to have. It got Burch's attention because it had wheels. He was almost as silent with other people as when he went away, but to Hilda, he talked a little when the subject interested him—short sentences, like a man. Now she pulled down the cottonwood limb that leaned low across the water, had him climb to his place on it, seated herself beside him and gently waggling and teetering the bough with a pushing foot against the ground, she declared:

“That's the way the new carriage will ride, Burchie. And Uncle Hank said Shorty was to get it for us. Shorty has to do it if Uncle Hank says so.”

Burch, filled full of breakfast and happy confidence, voted a strong yes. The two childish voices rippled an accompaniment to the rippling water. A king's coach of state would have appeared a modest vehicle beside the one Hilda described. She had no need to have seen it. The shining of her belief in Uncle Hank alone lent glitter to the varnish and softness to the cushions.

A dragon-fly flashed out from the other bank and hung above the water in all its burnished bravery, turning, wheeling, flickering, darting here and there, a dazzle of blue-black polish on body and wing. Hilda welcomed it as an illustration. She had all along been afraid that her eloquence alone might fall short of convincing the material-minded Burch. Here was something concrete, visible, with which to back up her assurances, and she cried out softly:

"It looks just like that, Burchie, only bigger. It's as shiny as that, and it can go 'most as quick; but it'll go the way Uncle Hank wants it to."

"It'll go the way I want it to," said Burch solemnly, watching the darting brightness. "I'll drive it—when we get it." He nodded his flaxen head toward the funny little green mound that stood in the side yard, matted with woodbine in the summer and wearing a peaked cap of snow of winters. "I'll drive right up on top of the mountain, and down on the other side," he announced.

Hilda surveyed the mound doubtfully; it was as sharp and definite as an upturned cup.

"Oh, no, brother," she demurred. Then as she saw protest in his face, she hastened to modify, "Well, not right at first. You'd upset, I'm afraid. Let's just drive round on the level for a good while; then, if Uncle Hank says you may, you can go over the mountain."

Day after day, for a whole week, their play was all concerned with the new carriage. It was present, with a wonderful reality, down behind the corral on sunny afternoons, out along the road from school, and beside the *asequia*.

When the wonderful morning of the contest came at last, the ancient crippled ambulance was, in Uncle

Hank's phrase, "toggled up," a pair of good ponies put to it, and the old man drove his household over the eighteen miles of open plain to Dawn. Rose Marie—a creature of infinite fineness, quick intuition, and warm, responsive sympathies, a pal to share a jest or a triumph with, and one who could hold her tongue till the stars fell, in short, the perfect friend, the companion genial yet reticent, discreet without austerity—Rose Marie sat between Hilda and Burchie. Ahead, Shorty, Jeff, Buster, Missou', old Snake Thompson, and the other Three Sorrows cowpunchers rode in a brave squad, from which came the sounds of jingling spurs, creaking saddles, and that deep, satisfying music of big bass voices.

It was a customary caravan. Sometimes as Hilda rode on, she was a Persian princess in her palanquin, with her retinue of slaves; or a prisoner, torn from some stately and glittering home, her cruel captors galloping beside, exchanging callous jest and laughter across her delicious, silken-robed despair. Aunt Val, on the seat by her, even Uncle Hank in front driving, never guessed what a world of her own, splendid, terrifying, marvelous, the child was riding through. Only Rose Marie might know.

But to-day all such imaginings were put aside for the more instant matter of the new carriage. She neglected to make sounds of pursuit or rescue out of the thudding hoofs of the led horses behind the ambulance, where trotted Pardner, Shorty's "gilt-edged cutting pony," and the sober buckskin-colored mount from the back of which Uncle Hank purposed later to view the races and the contest. Though Rose Marie displayed a new frock constructed from a veil of Miss Valeria's, the pressure of realities made it impossible for the doll to impersonate anything but a lady of the present day,

residing in Lame Jones County, the Texas Panhandle.

Even The-Boy-On-The-Train—who almost always took an important part in Hilda's invisible dramas—when bidden to appear and bear Hilda company, arrived in the character of a judge of the races, who, with grace of manner indescribable, and in a large round voice, announced, at the close of the contest, that the rider for the Three Sorrows had so far outdistanced all the others, that the carriage would have been his more than thrice over. "More than thrice." Hilda liked that phrase, and she repeated it several times, with variations and additions. Absorbed thus, she was oblivious to the natural and usual stages by which they arrived at Dawn and the fair grounds, where, stepping abruptly from the world of fantasy, she became just a little girl with eyes, ears, and thoughts for only one item of all the gay show. The horses, the cattle, the patchwork quilts, buttonholes, preserves, tidies, and hand-painted pin-cushions got no attention from her. Uncle Hank, reading her state of mind correctly, found a comfortable seat for Miss Val, and then led Hilda and Burchie to where stood the special prize for the roping contest.

With a good child's outward docility, she listened, mute, to the eager speculations as to who would probably win it. Of course nobody knew yet that the carriage was Hilda's very own. At any rate, the civil thing was to let these idle remarks pass unchallenged; and now the time was at hand when, Shorty having roped his steer, the Three Sorrows group could openly take possession of their own.

Life went by with little flavor or meaning, while the many products of nature, and of man's and woman's skill, were sampled, judged and the awards made. It still crept on listless wing where Hilda sat with Miss

Val and Burchie in the grand stand; and the gentlemen rode for the bullion-trimmed sombrero, which Scotty MacQueen won; and the ladies rode for a resplendent cow-girl saddle, which fell to Miss Jessie MacGregor. It made little better progress during the races, and the bestowal of the purse and the cup, the giving of the various first, second and third prizes. Yet it did pass. The moment did arrive when one said, and truly, that the roping contest was the only event now remaining.

CHAPTER XI

THE ROPING MATCH

“DON’T squirm like that, Hildegarde,” remonstrated Miss Van Brunt.

Hilda’s dilated eyes were questing wildly for Uncle Hank among the group of horsemen. He was gone. If she asked Aunt Val she would never be allowed to leave; so without a word she slipped away in search, and presently found him at the corrals. Before him Shorty stood, nursing upon his broad breast, with his left hand, something wrapped in a blood-stained handkerchief.

And that something? Oh, surely it was not Shorty’s own right hand—the hand which could cast the swiftest, cunningest lariat in western Texas—the only one which could write, with a twirl of the looped rope, the children’s formal deed to the dear, dear carriage! Yet it must be so, for Shorty, a grown man, was crying. Down his cheeks the big tears of anger and humiliation and disappointment were following each other, and he groaned:

“Oh, durn a fool—they ain’t worth raisin’! Here I been working my arms and legs off for weeks to get a fine edge on for this roping match— Hank, I ought to have better sense than to let them Romeros get me into a scrimmage—I knew well enough they was out after the carriage for the Matador. Now I’ve busted my hand on Juan Romero’s jaw. None of our boys is readied up to ride for the Sorrows. There’s nobody to get that carriage for the kids. Hank—you ought to fire me.”

Uncle Hank's back was to Hilda. Unseen, unsuspected she stood there, a small but excellent statue of Dismay. Here, at one blow, all hope and delight were struck out of life. Quite blind with despair, she turned and made a stumbling and uncertain way back to the grand stand, squeezing into her place beside Aunt Val and Burchie, carefully drawing her little dusty feet as far as possible from that lady's flounced skirts.

Darkness had fallen upon her world. Did these people about her think that the sun shone and that they were having a fair? Within Hilda's mind final disaster had arrived. Listlessly she sat beside her aunt, watching heavy-eyed while the preparations for the favorite event were made. She saw the wild outlaw steers, that had been gathered from all the ranches about, driven in, fighting, bellowing, protesting, as they poured into the oval in-field of the race-track, where they were held in a large pen from which a smaller one opened by heavy bars. This should have been a glorious sight, but now it was only part of the pageant of Hilda's defeat.

Even when Colonel Jack Peyton, formerly of Kentucky, rode out upon his gold-dust sorrel with the cream-colored mane, and, lifting high his hat with a double-curved sweep, announced that the roping match was about to begin, she just let him be Colonel Peyton. If Shorty couldn't ride, it was no use summoning The-Boy-On-The-Train to be judge. The crowd cheered him, as it always cheered the pictorial Kentuckian. Peyton bowed, flashed his white teeth in a smile beneath his dark mustache and recited the terms:

Each man should have only one trial, thus making the struggle short and sharp, and tincturing it with the stimulating element, chance. For the battle was

lost to him who failed to get a quick start after the steer at the outset, who missed his cast too often, or whose horse stumbled in a prairie-dog hole. From the mouth of the smaller pen, a steer was to be loosed to each contestant, and the moment his steer crossed the chalk-line he should be free to follow.

The contestants rode out and arranged themselves in front of the judge's stand. Hilda loved the sight of mounted men, accoutered as she was used to see them, for action. But she gave these a leaden glance—Shorty was not there. Young Doctor Ellis was near the center; he had a ranch of his own—maybe he'd win, and his little girls would ride in that carriage and never know that it belonged to Hilda and Burch—that it belonged to them "thrice over." Dark and hateful looked the faces of the Romero brothers; Hilda would have had no trouble in placing them in her ballad world just then. They were "the enemy."

Suddenly she straightened up, trembling. Her heart gave a vicious buck and seemed to stand still; for, the last of the line (apparently a hasty afterthought in the entries), rode—Uncle Hank on Buckskin!

A breeze of bantering applause greeted the old man. Some of it came from the grandstand.

"Go it, Hank!"

"Hi, Pearsall, hi!"

"Say, Hank, whirl in and learn the boys how to rope a steer and tie him."

One strange, squeaking, falsetto voice, the mere sound of which called out peals of mirth, piped:

"Well, I'll be hanged—from head to foot! If old Hank Pearsall ain't a-linin' out after that kerridge."

At the ludicrous tone and the laughter that answered it, a familiar voice bawled:

"Yes, and watch him get it too!"

Hilda looked to where Shorty stood, just below. She was thankful for a champion who could make himself heard. The great black eyes in her little peaked face flashed, and her lip trembled. They'd better not treat her Uncle Hank disrespectfully! But no—it was all right; the old man was laughing.

He took off his sombrero and bowed, with a touch of burlesque in his manner, in response to the familiar, hearty rallying. Even on horseback, his commanding six-foot-two of stature made itself noticed, while his hard leanness and his tremendous reach of arm were unmatched in that group of more youthful candidates.

The riders drew back to station; the bars between the two pens were let down and a steer was admitted into the smaller enclosure—a lean, sorrel-colored animal which ran instantly to the farther extremity of the pen, found it closed, and turned to rush back the way he had come. A mounted man with a big whip held him in check till the dividing bars were up. The bony, yellow brute whirled, and leaped from side to side of the little pen, attempting first one fence and then the other, to be opposed at each essay with whoops and yells, so that when the outer bars were finally withdrawn he shot forth, a tawny streak of maddened Texas steer.

At the pen's mouth waited Jim Tazewell, from the Quien Sabe, on his nervous bay cutting pony, Rusty. As the horse made after the yellow streak, Jim sitting easily in the saddle, his rope swinging about his head, over all the great assembly there was silence so intense that the soft noise made by the irregular thudding of those eight flying hoofs sounded curiously distinct. Tazewell had a pretty good start; Rusty was swift and dexterous. But there was a good deal of galloping and several thwarted attempts before the cast was success-

fully made; then came the moment of suspense when the pony was straining every nerve to keep with the steer, while both horse and rider watched for a chance to throw him.

When they had succeeded, Tazewell leaped from the saddle to tie the animal, sprang erect and held up his hands, signaling that the business was done. The applause which followed its successful completion quieted down, the judge read out Tazewell's time—sixty-two seconds.

Throughout this spectacle, Hilda had sat bent forward, scarcely breathing. Her cold little hands were clutched tightly together. Her heart was torn between the very real demands of neighborly kindness (for this was Kenny Tazewell's papa) and her fierce loyalty to Uncle Hank. Even the carriage was forgotten in the new emotion—this passion of blind partisanship, this spirit of crude, savage competition. Rose Marie, love's martyr, clutched to strangulation in an unconscious grasp, made never a sign to betray her agonies.

But now the yelling and whooping was renewed; a piebald steer galloped swiftly away from the outlet bars, followed by the rider from the Matador, young Lee Romero, nicknamed "the Kid," a boy yet in the early twenties.

Lee had ridden the range since he could crawl up on a horse, and was a crack roper, proud buster of broncos and of more than one faro bank. He made very certain, in his heart, of carrying the prize home to Velva Ortez of the Matador, and, as Hilda looked piteously at him, her own heart sank still lower. She secretly confessed that perhaps he was right.

When the piebald shot across the chalk-line, Romero, upon Nig, his black horse, close after him, tears

rose and swam in Hilda's eyes; and when, with no mishap whatever, Lee made his cast and the noose settled as though predestined about the curving horns, the little girl's throat ached, a great tear splashed into Rose Marie's skittish gamboge hair, and she murmured bitterly, beneath her breath:

"But—but Uncle Hank's older. He—Lee Romero ought not to— They might know— Uncle Hank can't—"

Her chest contracted spasmodically and cut the poor sentences in two with painful gasps. And the last, choking, whispering cry was always:

"He—Uncle Hank—he's older'n they are!"

Meantime Lee had dropped into the carelessness of the cock-sure. As the steer fell heavily to the jerk of his staunch pony, he took two or three dallies round the saddle-horn with an off-hand flourish, skipped smiling from horse, and hastened, cord in hand, to tie his victim. But the instant the steer felt the hand of man upon him, he surged to his feet, casting Romero into a somewhat unsightly wad on the dusty turf. Of Hilda's emotions at this sudden collapse of Lee Romero's fortunes probably least said is best.

Nig pulled backward on the rope, but the Kid's hasty dallies had not made it fast to the horn. With the first jerk it tautened, gave, gave yet again, and at the final vicious lunge, came off the saddle entirely, the piebald steer going over and over sidewise, Nig falling backward, just as young Romero was rising, somewhat dazed.

A roar of amusement went up from the crowd; for nobody was hurt, and it would have been hard to say which of the three looked most sheepish, as they all got to their ten feet at once, the spotted steer, the vain-glorious Kid, or the pony, which had nowise been at

fault. Hilda laughed and trembled and cried all together. She prayed, too, a little, under her breath and doubtfully, fearing that it might not be altogether respectful to approach God in such a connection. Yet refrain entirely, she could not.

The next man was a rider of the C Bar C, Clarke Capadine's ranch. He missed his throw repeatedly, and time was finally called upon him from the judge's stand.

There followed Zeph Baird, for the Bar 99, on his little horse, Scotty. When Baird at last negotiated a successful cast of the rope, the big, heavy steer, with a tremendous plunge, jerked the light horse and rider forward on to their heads. Baird rolled free. There were exclamations and cries of distress as pony and steer struggled to their feet and, connected by the lariat, ran and pulled back and forth dangerously near the prostrate man.

At sight of him lying there, a sense of bloodguiltiness was upon Hilda, from which she was only rescued by mounted men going out and bringing him back, not seriously hurt.

Meanwhile the pony, Scotty, seizing his chance when the lariat trailed beneath the big steer, suddenly "set back on the rope," and the animal went over in a somersault, whereupon there broke out a perfect storm of relieved laughter, hand-clapping and cheering, amid which Scotty—true to his name—continued with great caution to move slowly backwards, keeping the rope taut, dragging the steer, inch by inch, until a man rode out and tied the animal's feet.

Here was a triumph which Hilda might praise with a light heart—Scotty was not a contestant with Uncle Hank. She clapped her hands and shouted generously, till Aunt Valeria fretfully bade her be still.

Jack Pardon of the Cross K, MacGregor's ranch, rode next, and there was much noisy enthusiasm at the announcement of his record of sixty seconds, which bettered Jim Tazewell's time by two seconds. There followed several riders whose respective performances were not especially notable, and none of whom succeeded in lowering Pardon's record.

At last, standing up on her strained tip-toes, looking over the heads of those in front, Hilda could see that there was just one steer in the pen; she had already noted, with wildly beating pulses, that only one rider was left. In Lane Jones County's great premier roping contest, with Jack Pardon's time of sixty seconds so far the best, there remained but one round to be fought: old Hank Pearsall, on Buckskin, the party of the first part; a long-horned, wild-eyed steer of the original Texas type, fleet, savage, knowing, the party of the second part.

The tall, gaunt, brindled steer, at the yelling set up by the drivers, leaped over the lowered poles into the small pen and flung himself half across the outlet bars, refusing to be beaten back, bursting through them before they could be taken down. Pearsall, somewhat delayed in getting his start after the animal, was received with a laugh. It was undeniable that both Buckskin and his rider bore a touch of the antiquated, which, despite old Hank's look of the thoroughbred cowman, was irresistibly suggestive of humor in such a connection—a graybeard at the Olympic games.

Hilda felt her chest swell and pinch in—swell and pinch in—not as though she were really breathing at all. Her throat seemed to close up altogether. A dimness was over her vision as she watched Uncle Hank, who, with his long loop swinging free from his

right hand, the rein hanging as loosely in the left, leaned forward, very upright and at an angle with his saddle, speaking a low word to Buckskin, while that worthy made for the flying steer. Hilda saw his lips move, and wondered if he, too, were praying, but decided against the likelihood of it.

This steer was a notorious outlaw, which had made more than one roping match interesting. As Buckskin and Uncle Hank drew toward his left quarter, he whirled suddenly upon them. Hilda thrust Rose Marie down on the bench and sat on her and never knew it. She cried aloud, and was not aware of it. She instantly trafficked with Heaven, in a desperate panic of love and terror, proffering back all hope of the precious, much-needed, long-desired carriage, if Uncle Hank were only permitted to return safely to her. A carriage one might forgo; it was in the nature of a luxury; Uncle Hank was the very groundwork and underpinning of existence.

But Hilda had not reckoned with Buckskin, just as the brindled steer had not. If the steer was a survivor of numerous encounters, Buckskin was no less seasoned a warrior. Disciplined cow pony that he was, veteran of many a roundup, wise, alert, quick as a cat and of an indomitable spirit, able to whirl where he stood almost like a man, Buckskin, whose eyes had never left the steer and whose instinct had warned him in advance of the big brute's intended maneuver, made of the apparent check his rider's opportunity.

The movements were too quick for the eye to follow, but when again Hilda saw the group clearly, Buckskin had evaded those long, sharp horns and was once more upon the steer's quarter, well back of him. Uncle Hank's right arm lifted, the swinging coil of rope rose

to the horizontal, sang round and round and out of it a line darted forward, exactly as the serpent sends forth its length from the spring of its coil.

The noose opened like a live thing, dropped, clutched and fastened upon those spreading horns. Buckskin swerved in behind the running steer; Uncle Hank allowed the rope's length to drop to the ground, and the steer, in his stride, ran over it, so that it trailed back to the rider's hand from between the galloping hind feet.

Instantly, Buckskin "set back on the rope," with crouched haunches and braced forefeet. The line tautened; the brindled nose shot to earth; the hind feet rose and cut through the air in a half-circle, and the beast, having turned a somersault, alighted upon his back with such a thump that it seemed his spine must have cracked.

There was hesitant cheering; Uncle Hank slipped from the saddle and ran to tie those four motionless feet. A sea of gratitude went over Hilda. Just as the old man's weight was thrown upon him, the steer, which had been stunned for a moment, recovered breath and consciousness and reared tumultuously. But no cocksureness had been Hank's. If he failed this day, please Heaven, it should be because he could not possibly win through, the best that he and Buckskin could do. The rope had been made firmly fast to the saddle-horn—the rope which, prepared for Shorty's use, they had tested and tried for this very exigency. With the creature's first wild plunge, Buckskin heaved himself backward, while Uncle Hank's strong arm grappled the big horns, and all his weight was flung upon the rearing head, which once more went down flat upon the plain, the long, brindled neck stretched out to Buckskin's zealous pull.

Once more the clapping and cheering broke forth, but this time with no assistance from Hilda. She was past speech. The sudden relief had left her weak. To an accompaniment of friendly applause, Uncle Hank tied his steer's feet, sprang erect and threw up his hands. The cheerful noise held for a moment, then all was intensely still as Colonel Peyton was seen to ride up to the judge's stand, stop-watch in hand.

Judge Eldredge leaned across and spoke to the colonel. There was a brief space of uncertainty, during which Hilda was sure she aged rapidly; several voices were heard in unofficial statements, which cleft her heart like so many swords.

"Sixty-two seconds, I make it," announced one. "It's a tie with Tazewells' time."

"Better'n that," declared another. "Pearsall made it in exactly—"

Old man Morrison broke in with: "Oh, no, you're 'way off. Hank's time is only sixty seconds—jest one plumb minute. My watch—"

"Ssh!" cried the crowd as one man, for Colonel Peyton and the gold-dust sorrel were coming forward.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the Kentuckian began, as he bowed, smiling, "friends and fellow-citizens of our new county, I think we have all been given a surprise."

A vague murmur arose. The smiling speaker waited a moment, then continued:

"I take pride in stating that the best time made to-day is fifty-eight seconds. The winner distanced all other contestants by just two seconds. Ladies and gentlemen—"

The dark eyes enjoyingly swept the mute expectant faces before him—none knew better than Colonel Peyton of Kentucky how to heighten an effect by dramatic delay.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure in announcing to you that the prize goes to Henry J. Pearsall, riding for the Ranch of the Three Sorrows.”

Colonel Jack Peyton smiled and pranced away on his gold-dust sorrel, without the least suspicion that he had just made an appearance and uttered a speech that would, by comparison, leave all after efforts of his life vain and useless.

Meantime, the surprise and approval which The-Boy-On-The-Train's understudy had bespoken, had answered the announcement. Uncle Hank, quietly leading in Buckskin, was met and hailed and pounded on the back, as he made his way toward the grand stand, where a small girl with very large dark eyes stood up on the seat and unconsciously cried aloud her inmost heart, mopping the tears from her face with a rag-doll's gamboge hair.

CHAPTER XII

THE FUGITIVE

AFTER that roping match, on the ranch of the Three Sorrows—a small island of human life and interests, surrounded on every side by a sea of grass whose fishes were cattle—year followed year until five had been added to the number of them, and Hilda was thirteen.

The carriage, now a sober, elderly vehicle, had carried Miss Val and Burchie many times as far as Mesquite on their journeyings to Fort Worth, for Miss Val—who was now frankly the invalid—found there at the sanitarium a system of baths and massage which she said helped her neuralgia very much. But it never helped it enough to let her live at the ranch more than a month or so at a time, and Burch she must have with her. She put him in a Fort Worth school and said she'd keep him under the doctor's observation till he should be perfectly sound.

To anybody else's notion but hers, he had been that for a long time. It appeared there had never been anything the matter with his hearing; anyhow, he was now a particularly well-grown boy for his years, still silent, and with that air he might have inherited from his father, or caught from Aunt Val, of being just a visitor at the ranch. He never seemed to belong to it—or it to him. Hardly any of the things Hilda cared most for were of interest to Burch.

Of course, he was off there in Fort Worth during the "Winter of the Big Snow," that heart-breaking

season which followed the blizzard that marooned Uncle Hank and Hilda on the Bar Thirteen. The Three Sorrows had been provided, as well as Uncle Hank could provide, against such a happening with stacks of the coarse laguna hay; but Hilda would never forget that time when, kept home from school by the weather, she tried to help with the poor weak cows that pawed at the frozen snow without being able to get through to anything they could eat, or licked it without being able to get anything they could drink. Uncle Hank said she worked like a little Trojan, and from that year she felt herself more and more increasingly his right hand.

So the brother to whom she wrote dutiful letters, whenever she wrote to Aunt Val, and who soon began to send her back short answers that were rather better written and spelled than her own, came to cut little figure in her life of work and play. At school there were companions of her own age to contend against, confide in—boys and girls who lived the ranch life. And there was always The-Boy-On-The-Train to remember. In all this time, Hilda had never forgotten him. He seemed more real in some ways than Burch or Aunt Val or any one or anything that had belonged to the old life. All else that concerned that time got dim and changed; he remained the one who was always just right—the one who could do no wrong.

But when there is a live boy, like Kenny Tazewell or Clarke Capadine, at hand to ride races with, how then? Does one forget the absent—at least while the hot blood is drumming in one's ears, and every trick that Uncle Hank has taught is needed to keep the pony going straight, to stay on him and avoid dog-holes? We-ell, maybe so. But when the there-present boy wins, and isn't very nice about it, and there might be

some suspicion that he didn't ride fairly, ah, then one recalls with pride and joy The-Boy-On-The-Train, the being without fault, the dweller in the fair mirage-land of memory, who could be nothing less than noble and generous!

He would never have ridden the faster pony. *He* would be incapable of crowding one in so close to the fence that it was pull up or be scraped off—and that, too, after treacherously offering that side of the road in all appearance of good faith. No, no! Far otherwise. *He* would have brought the proud-crested barb, or the milk-white palfrey swifter than the steeds of dawn, or the coal-black stallion eagle-winged, for his lady to ride. *He* would have helped her on, resigned the best place, and smiled when her mount outran his'n—oh, well, then, *his*.

The Marchbanks children had never come again to the Capadine ranch. Colonel Lee Marchbanks stayed in New Mexico. They all went into Hilda's world of memory and tradition. The further edge of this world of tradition and memory melted into the world of books. And Hilda had got to be a great reader of books.

There had come to Texas with the Van Brunt furniture quite a library. Some of it was unpacked and filled the bookshelves in the living-room; when it overflowed these, a lot of it went into the little place they called the office; but there were still books in boxes in the cellar. The things Hilda loved best she read over and over; she knew pages of Marmion and Lady of the Lake by heart, not to mention her beloved ballads. Great musical, stirring lines from these were always jingling through her head when she played at home. Sometimes she went about saying them under her breath. Or—and this was a sort of fearful pleasure—

saying some lines of her own that she more or less made up as she went along.

If you did that long enough, the things around you changed, kind of melted into a dream: the ranch house became a castle; Shorty and Missou' and the others were retainers; old Sam Kee, in the kitchen, was a Swart Paynim—he made a very good Swart Paynim, indeed.

With one of Aunt Val's cast-off dresses on, a veil arranged for the headdress of a castle lady, the dream thrived splendidly. At these times she instinctively dodged Uncle Hank and the boys as much as she could. It broke in dreadfully to have one of them sing out: "Hello, Hilda—playin' lady?" It even hurt to have Uncle Hank look at her with absent fondness and call her "Pettie," when it seemed he might almost have seen that she was the despairing lady of "the house of the Rhodes," with bloody Edom o' Gordon besieging her walls.

But one day, in the spring of the year she was thirteen, rummaging in the cellar, trying to pry open a heavy box of books, she made a wonderful find. Back of these boxes, concealed by them and forgotten, because they had stood untouched there for years, she discovered an opening in the earth wall—an unmistakable door. It was low, not very wide, unframed except by the earth-and-stone walls of the cellar side, made of rough, heavy planks marked with hieroglyphics of dust and draped mournfully with cobwebs; it had iron hinges like those on the stable door, and was closed only with a loop of leather and a big nail. Silent, unknown, unsuspected—a very gateway of mystery—all alone down there under the ground, this crude, sinister, little door stung Hilda's imagination like a strange,

threatening word out of another tongue, whispered in the dark.

Trembling, she pushed upon it. It gave inward creakingly. Utter blackness was beyond it. She flew up the cellar stairs to Sam Kee with a breathless demand for a candle. After some argument, the candle was secured and lighted. She hurried to the cellar and, with a heart that beat to suffocation, cautiously shoved open the door—her door—her discovery.

She entered, not without half-ecstatic tremors. It was an underground passage! She traversed twelve or fifteen feet of the narrow corridor, where earth showed between rough planking, and came to another door. This one sagged half-way open, revealing a fair-sized chamber, earth-walled also behind its planks, and with a heavily timbered ceiling, big beams in its corners and at intervals along the sides, and a window with a batten shutter opposite the entrance. She stood a moment, enraptured, the candle flame going up very straight and sickly in that unaired space. Then she went almost reverently across the floor of beaten earth, set down her candle and pulled at the rusty hasp of the shutter. It came back suddenly with a creak. Daylight streamed in—sunlight—checked by a strong lattice of naked woodbine stems. Between these she peered. There was the spring, with the sheen dancing on its waters as it pulsed away into the *asequia*. She must be standing inside of the steep green mound by the willows, the "mountain" up which Burch had proposed to drive the new carriage. This window must pierce its slope, masked by the woodbine. She had in fact come upon the forgotten cyclone cellar of the ranch house. In a daze of delight, she looked about her.

"Oh, oh!" she whispered under her breath, then flew to bring in an old broom from the cellar outside, and with it some cloths; swept and wiped away the accumulated dust. Her mind was clamorous with plans. Rose Marie and Captain Snow would be the only companions she could have here, the only sharers of the secret whose discretion might be trusted; and the place must be made fit for the great white cat's fastidious fancy, the doll's cambric daintiness.

There was a big box for the table, a smaller one for a chair, and Burchie's disused high-chair to prop the doll in. At one side was a shelf with some empty bottles and cans on it. These she replaced by an arm-load of her favorite books from the library. She made a game of this, though there was nobody in the house but stolid Sam Kee, who never asked any questions. It was delightful to pile up the things she wanted taken down, then scout and see that "the coast was clear," catch them up and run with them, outwitting espionage, evading pursuit. When all was done she surveyed the chamber and its furnishings with satisfaction. Here was the place to read, to make up stories, to dream and act those she read or made up. In short, here was a new stage—secret, safe, solitary—on which the never-ending, always-changing drama might go forward. Here was innocent escape from the world about her, well-loved, comfortable, but too definite, too importunate to permit the dream—the blessed and beautiful dream—which would undoubtedly come true in such a place as this.

One sunny, blowy Sunday afternoon Hilda forsook the light of day and made her way through the dark passage into the cyclone cellar, her candle held high in one hand, the other carefully conveying a battered tray on which were some cakes and half a glass

of jelly. On the box table lay a sort of costume into which she got, after she had set down tray and candle before the doll's fixed stare.

The dress was her favorite of all those cast-offs of Miss Valeria's, a changeable silk, shimmering from green to gold as the plain itself did when the buffalo grass was tall on it and the wind went over. There was a froth of lace and little bright-colored ribbon bows for trimming, exactly like the tossing bells of wild hollyhock or the phlox that bloomed in millions on that plain. Oh, it was a heavenly dress to wear when you were playing Flora MacDonald rowing Prince Charlie across the lake, or Katherine Douglass barring the door against the enemies of King Jamie—barring it with her arm, which they broke as they burst through!

To-day it was to be Flora MacDonald, and the *asequia*—the little irrigating ditch—was to be the "practicable water" for the scene. Hilda pulled the veil into place on her hair, swung the long trailing skirts smoothly down her slim little figure and slipped across to open the shutter behind the masking lattice of woodbine stems, her lips already moving, murmuring fragments of high converse, phrases of faith, loyalty, gratitude, renunciation. Her big black eyes swam full, misty with the vision. She had stepped—as always on entering the cyclone cellar—from Texas soil into the realm of romance.

The open shutter let in the dancing light reflected from the water, and all checkered with the beautiful thatch of tender green leaves that the woodbine was sprouting. Without coming to earth at all, Hilda felt the joy of it. Leaning ardently forward, she rustled the woodbine stems, whereupon some one, stooping to drink at the spring just outside her casement, started

violently, sprang half erect, whirled and stood staring directly into her face.

A fugitive! Even to Hilda the fact spoke plain. She—expecting to see, with the vision of fancy, exactly what now confronted her in the flesh—was not greatly startled. The young fellow stood looking at her, his head, with its fair hair flung up, the blue eyes full of terror. While she gazed at him, lips apart, unable to emerge from her spell of fantasy, he reached out vaguely to the dusty, big hat that lay beside him on the grass, got quite to his feet and, with a glance behind him, came up to the woodbine lattice. He laid a shaking hand upon it, peering through at her face, anxiously, doubtfully—and began with a sort of faltering haste:

“Can I—could I get—in there? Can you hide me? They’re close after me!”

“They” had been “close after” pretty much everybody in Hilda’s cyclone-cellar world for a long time now. He looked the part, and this was the one thing he could have said without jarring the dream, without so much as brushing the down from the tip of its rainbow wing. At the words, she sank back gratefully into the realm of the fabulous, and he receded from the world of reality to follow her there.

“Why, yes,—your—” she hesitated an instant. “Your Majesty,” she whispered, just above her breath.

Perhaps he was not quite sure of the word; perhaps he was too perturbed to notice such a detail.

“Quick!” he urged; “show me how to get in there.”

Something about his face challenged and puzzled her. There was a haunting resemblance about the look of his eyes. Yet all realities strove vainly for more than vague recognition now. She was in a sort of rapture as she leaned forward and whispered:

“Stay for me; I will not fail you.” Then, to make sure: “I’m coming. I’ll bring you in here.”

She gathered up her draperies and ran. The daylight world of the Three Sorrows had never seen those trailing, faded splendors, ravished from Aunt Val’s cast-offs; but haste was indicated. A moment later, to the young fellow at the spring, hanging doubtfully on his heel, a hunted glance over his shoulder, preparing for flight, there came skimming across the grass a quaint figure. The dress of Hilda’s contriving trailed behind her flying feet, the tangle of mist-fine dark curls was half covered by a coiffing veil, worn in the manner of castle ladies as they appear in the frontispieces of feudal romances. The fugitive looked in wonder. She ran to him and took his hand and pulled him toward the house. He held back a little, but she urged vehemently:

“You’ll have to come right through here. It’s the only way.”

In the kitchen door, at sight of the Chinese cook, the young fellow checked wildly. Hilda gripped his hand in both hers, and dropped momentarily out of her part to explain:

“It’s only Sam Kee. He doesn’t count. He never tells on me—do you, Sam?”

The Chinaman looked placidly about eighteen inches over their heads, smiled, and seemed to imply that the room was empty except for himself. There was something reassuring in this attitude, and Hilda’s chance guest followed her quickly down the cellar steps, behind the pile of boxes, and through the passage that led to the cyclone chamber.

“Are you—are you an-hungered?” she asked, with a sort of half-tentative hardihood.

He dropped down on the box seat and eyed the food

with an air so exactly suited to his rôle that she took heart and fell into the familiar phraseology:

"Here is the humble meal I have provided. If you will rest and refresh yourself, I'll, I'll—"

Her voice trailed a bit at last. The newcomer was looking at her with so sharp an inquisition that it sent a vague pang through her heart.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I'm hungry." The blue eyes went swiftly over the items on the cracker-box table. Under that glance they seemed to diminish somewhat in bulk and decline in nourishing quality. Hilda became acutely aware of the realness of his trouble, the actual dust on his clothes, the parched, cracked lips, the exhaustion and distress of his whole young figure.

"I can get something more," she said hurriedly. "I can make Sam Kee give me a glass of milk and some bread, and, I guess, some—some—chicken."

"Wait—" He caught her as she passed, examining her face with that bluntly inquiring, suspicious gaze. "Can you get the things without anybody else knowing? You wouldn't tell any one else—"

"Oh," cried Hilda, aghast. "Betray you? No, no, no—never—of course not!"

Slowly, as though still half uncertain, he released her. She turned and almost ran through the familiar dark passage. In her breast choking sympathy reproached the triumphant delight of having her play come true. And there hung, as it were, on the heels of these swifter emotions, a slow, uncomprehending sense of hurt at the fugitive's lack of trust in her.

Negotiations with Sam Kee were brief, for Hilda had that within her which reckoned with no refusal. It seemed to her but a moment that she was gone, yet she found that her guest had eaten the last crumb of

the little cakes. He fell ravenously upon the more substantial food she brought back.

"Sam Kee's making a cup of coffee," said Hilda.

The young fellow nodded his head. When he had finished the food, he looked across at her and said:

"I guess I've got to tell you about myself."

"You needn't," Hilda maintained loyally.

He sat for a while, looking away, a clenched hand lying on his knee. Twice he drew in his breath to speak, and turned his head, without ever quite bringing his gaze around to hers. Suddenly he got up and went to the window. He stood there, plucking at the vine leaves. Her big black eyes followed him; they noted that bright hair—dusty now, sweat-darkened in streaks, yet such as a prince ought to have; they dwelt on the outlines of his tired figure, rimmed with its halo of light; gallant, victorious, yet in danger, needing her—she could read all that into it. He whirled abruptly and came toward her.

"Suppose they told you I'd killed a man," he said.

There was an awful silence in the close little room. Hilda was as one who comes upon a dizzying abyss, horrible, chaotic, yawning to swallow both dream and reality. But she was made of heroic stuff. In spirit she approached the edge and looked down, wincing but resolute and clinging to the hand of her hero.

It was terrible; why, yes, to be sure it was terrible. But, oh, it had a gorgeous thrill to it! What was the use of hiding a fugitive and enduring "all" for his sake if he hadn't committed some dreadful deed—several of them, for that matter? Richard Cœur de Lion slew men in heaps and piles; so did King Harold. Why, all the kings and princes did, and the splendid warriors, in those old times. Shorty knew fellows that had killed their man, and Buster and the others,

too; and they said they were good boys just the same. More than once there had been a man at the Three Sorrows table, or sequestered in the Three Sorrows bunk house, about whom it had been an open secret that he was "on the dodge" because of a shooting scrape. If you came right down to it, Uncle Hank himself had lent the last one a horse and money. These considerations did not decide Hilda's course. She was for her fugitive anyhow, right or wrong, and whatever or whoever might have been against him. But there was a certain pleasure in realizing her immediate public opinion to be with her. Aloud, she said:

"How—why—how did you know to come to me?"

He answered, curiously, with another question, coming slowly back and sitting down again:

"This is the Three Sorrows ranch, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I thought it was, but I didn't dare to ride up and ask." Then, after a moment's pause, in which he studied her, "You must be Hilda Van Brunt."

"I am Hilda."

"Thank God. I'm all right, then."

"Yes," said Hilda. "I'll take care of you."

"Is your father in the house? Can you bring him down here?"

They were sitting on opposite sides of the box table, the candle between them sending up its flame very tall and straight and steady. When the boy said this Hilda's little peaked face looked suddenly white, because the eyes became bigger and darker with the dilation of their pupils. She locked her hands hard together in her lap to keep from sobbing outright in her excitement. She reminded herself of the dust on his clothes, the feeling of his hand when she had taken it to drag him past Sam Kee. There was nothing to be

so dreadfully frightened about. After a long time—the boy watching her, puzzled and uneasy—she got her voice under control.

“Didn’t you know my father was dead?” she asked, very low. “He was killed in a roundup seven years ago, and there’s nobody to look after my brother and me and the ranch—and even Aunt Val—but Uncle Hank.”

The newcomer sat perfectly still a moment, staring blankly. Slowly the bright head went down on his arms, his shoulders began to heave.

Hilda gazed with an agony of repressed pity at that prone, boyish head. The young fellow seemed to her a man, and his grief a thing to shake the foundations. Her hand longed to steal out and touch him, but she drew it back. She looked about the dark little plank-walled chamber, lit by its one candle. With a start of something so alien that it was almost distaste, her eye encountered Rose Marie’s saucy, smiling beauty over among the shadows of one corner. Yet the big, somber burden of Hilda’s yearning sympathy was played upon, shot through and through and lightened by delectable, rosy shafts. It was so very real; it was so very dear to be of use—to be of great use. With instinctive tact she took no notice of her guest’s outburst, but crept away to take the dishes to Sam Kee. Returning, she gave considerate warning with a little fumble at the inner door, and when she entered caught up Rose Marie and thrust her out of sight (a gesture as significant in its way as, in an earlier day, was the investing of the Roman lad with the toga *virilis*) this was no affair for dolls. She edged into the seat across from the fugitive. Presently he raised his head and spoke:

“Hilda” (somehow his use of her name startled

her), "those men are after me—if they get their hands on me—I guess they'll hang me."

"Oh," breathed Hilda, and the dream began to draw away.

"I remembered that Three Sorrows was right over here in Lame Jones County"—yes, that's just what he said: "I *remembered* that the Three Sorrows was right over here in Lame Jones County," and Hilda's eyes grew bigger as she gazed at him. Her breath began to come short.

"You're—" she whispered.

But he went on, not heeding, "I knew if I could get here, I'd be safe."

Then Hilda cried out:

"You're The-Boy-On-The-Train!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE-BOY-ON-THE-TRAIN

“**H**-S-S-SH!” The boy’s anxious eyes were on her. “I—I thought you knew me, Hilda. I’d never have come into this place to hide—if I hadn’t thought you knew me. I knew you, the minute I saw your eyes.”

“Did you?” Hilda thought that was rather a stupid, inadequate thing to say, the minute it was out. But the shock of having the memory and the dream burst in upon the realities of her play and mix up with it like this left her almost without words. “It’s all right,” she whispered, finally. “I’ll take care of you—same as Father would have done.”

There was no danger of being overheard, yet she whispered. In her breast flamed all the ardors of all the heroines whose brave deeds she delighted in and envied. The amazing, the incredible, had happened. The-Boy-On-The-Train was here. He hadn’t arrived with music and flying banners. He had fled to her, accused, pursued, in danger. He had fled to her! That thought would have given her strength for more than she had to do. She bent forward and murmured eagerly:

“Nobody knows this place but me. Nobody can find you. I’ll bring you food—I can bring plenty—even if you have to stay for days and days. I’ll get the coffee now—just wait.”

She hurried out, threaded the passage swiftly, went

up the stairs into the kitchen—and came upon Uncle Hank standing talking to Sam Kee!

Why did she not rush to him with news of the lad in the cellar? He had given money, as well as shelter, to that other fugitive—the one the boys had hidden in the bunk house that time—the one that had killed a man. Was it only an unwillingness to share her responsibility and her joy in that responsibility?

Hank had never seen the castle-lady dress which she now carelessly exposed to his view. It made him smile, as he asked:

“What you up to, Pettie, all rigged out that-a-way? Playin’ lady?”

She stiffened at the kindly patronage of the tone.

“Yes, I’m playing,” she said briefly. A furtive look went to the candle and cup of hot coffee which Sam Kee had prepared and set on the table, according to the bargain made and ratified with him. She got away from Uncle Hank, just how, she could not afterward remember; details of this sort escape from persons of her temperament. As a matter of fact, she had made up her mind to be a little severe with the old man if he was too inquisitive. But, fortunately for him, he was busy, his thoughts were elsewhere, and so he escaped this severity, and she got downstairs with the coffee before it cooled.

When Hilda got back she found that the boy had opened the shutter under the woodbine, and stood there looking at something he held in his hand.

“Oh—ought you?” Hilda asked.

“Yes. It’s all right. When I was out there, and spoke to you, I couldn’t see a thing till I came right up and put my face against the vines. What does this mean, Hilda?”

She saw now that he held a letter-head of the ranch; printed at the top was: "Ranch of the Three Sorrows, Lame Jones County, Texas, Henry J. Pearsall, Mgr."

"Is—is that man here—now?"

"He isn't in the house—but he will come—at dinner time, I guess," Hilda spoke falteringly; her responsibility for the fugitive had been sweet; but, of course, he'd rather depend on Uncle Hank than on a small girl. "I'll tell him about you when he comes, if you want me to," she finished in a diminished voice.

There was a long silence between them, of a quality curiously embarrassing to Hilda. She felt ready to cry.

"Don't you want me to tell Uncle Hank?" The boy looked bewildered.

"Is that your father's brother? It isn't any one that was with you coming out here?"

"He's not my real uncle. It's—you know—the manager." She pointed to the sheet he still held. "He'd be just the same as papa. He'd do anything that papa would do."

She broke off, noting how reluctant he seemed.

"I'll not tell him—or anybody—if you'd rather not," she said—and felt a guilty thrill of rapture as he responded:

"Well—for the present—maybe it would be better."

Hilda tried to say something in answer to that, but somehow she couldn't. A sort of disconsolate silence held the dim little chamber for a time. Then, just as the young fellow seemed about to speak again, this silence was broken startlingly by the jingling and thudding sounds of mounted men coming at a trot into the side yard, almost over their heads.

Instantly he reached forward and snuffed out the flame of the candle, and Hilda darted to the window

and softly closed the shutter. As she came back on her way toward the passage, he groped out in the darkness and caught her hand, whispering:

“What shall we do?”

“Just be still,” Hilda breathed, close to his ear. “You’re safe here. I’ll go and deceive—the—pursuers.”

She went toward the door; stopped a moment, looking over her shoulder, trying to see him in the dark, then went out; dragged shut the sagging door after her; blundered along the passage; slammed the outer one with a noise that scared her; pantingly shoved the empty boxes and barrels in place to conceal it, and ran up the cellar stairs. In the warm, sweet-smelling kitchen Sam Kee was making dried-apple pies. As she fled past, she thought he said to her, “You all light. No be scare.” Then she was in the office door, and some strange men were coming in at its other door with Uncle Hank.

“You’re free of the whole ranch, Sheriff Daniels,” the old man was saying. “You and your posse are welcome to search.” The crispness of his tone made something way down deep in Hilda giggle and clap its hands. Goodness—wasn’t she glad she hadn’t told Uncle Hank! He—even he—couldn’t have spoken up that way if he’d known what was hid in the cyclone cellar. Now he went on:

“Miss Van Brunt has got the little boy with her in Fort Worth. Just at this speaking there’s only Pettie and me and the cook about the place. It’s broad daylight. Couldn’t nobody have got into the house without being seen—but you’re free to search. And you’re welcome to go around to the bunk house and see if you can find any one there. I always give the law any assistance in my power.”

“Well, we trailed him so far, and I’ve been pretty well over your ranch, Pearsall,” the Sheriff said in the irritable tone of a man who is losing. “If he ain’t in the house, I don’t know where he’s at. With your permission, we’ll look here, and when your boys come in at noon we’ll see if he’s lifted a horse off of you and made a getaway.”

Pearsall’s eye fell on Hilda, and the look on her face instantly struck him. He stepped across at once and put an arm around her shoulders. He did not notice that she had not come to him.

“Ain’t a thing to be afraid of, Pettie,” he reassured her. “These gentlemen think they’re on the trail of a feller that’s—” he hesitated appreciably—“er that’s got into trouble down in Wild Hoss County. They believe he’s rode right into the Sorrers and et his pony and camped in one of our bedrooms.”

There was a somewhat sheepish acknowledgment of this sally as the men trooped after Pearsall, making a search of the rooms, upstairs and down. After that Hilda crouched above them on the steps, daylight behind her, her face in shadow, watching in fascinated terror while they explored the cellar, carrying lamps and candles. But they gave only a negligent glance to the tiers of empty cracker boxes which screened the door to the passage, as everybody else except Hilda had done for years. They abandoned the cellar finally and tramped noisily back into the kitchen.

“You see ’um white man?” the sheriff demanded of Sam Kee. “Heap tired—been ridin’ long ways—all dusty and dirty—you see ’um?”

Hilda’s heart stood still. But Sam Kee never glanced toward her.

“I see ’um you,” he grunted, looking Daniels up and down, and turned aside to his pie-making.

The men grinned.

"Look-a here, you don't want to get fresh with me." Daniels's face was red. "You never can get nothing out of a Chink," he growled. "Scatter out, boys, and search the yard."

The yard! Hilda shook so that she could hardly walk; but she followed them. Sam Kee's hen-house gave up nothing; the shrubbery was inspected without profit. They finally trailed down to the spring for a drink, preparatory to riding away baffled, if not satisfied. Hilda was so close after them that it brought Uncle Hank along, though it had been his thought to speed them, somewhat stiffly, from the porch steps.

Right at the edge where the fugitive had stopped to drink Hilda saw footprints.

"Whose tracks are these?" demanded the sheriff, bending to them. "By jinks! They're mighty like those we found where that feller'd camped last night."

"They're mine, I guess," Hilda spoke out very loud, because she was so afraid to speak at all.

"Come here, Pearsall," called Daniels. "Listen to what this young lady says. She never made these tracks." He glanced curiously at Hilda's flamboyant attire.

"I'm not a lady!" The small hands flew up to Hilda's breast in a startled gesture. "I'm just a little girl. This is a—a play dress." She looked down at the footprints, and the world about her wavered toward the awful calamity, but she went on gallantly: "When I'm playing sometimes I wear different clothes and different shoes."

"Were you down here this morning?"

"Yes. I was here. I was right where I could see this place all morning."

"Where you could see this place?" The sheriff repeated her words, and Hilda's tortured eye sought the woodbine lattice which masked the window of the cyclone cellar. They were all watching her. Hank came at a stride and took his position beside her. She almost wished he hadn't come. He was sure to look at the vine stems and see what she saw.

Her captive must have opened the shutter; she thought she could make out the faint white blur of his face inside there. She dragged her gaze away and looked dumbly at the men about her. Had she betrayed him, after all? Would they take him out and kill him, through her fault?

"Well?" demanded the sheriff, impatiently. "Speak up, little girl—and be quick about it, too."

But at that Uncle Hank bristled.

"See here, Daniels, the child may say she's not a lady, yet, but you've got to treat her like one. She's Miss Hildegarde Van Brunt; she and her little brother are owners of the Three Sorrows ranch, and I'm her paid manager."

It gave Hilda a strange thrill to hear herself thus set forth by Uncle Hank. It was as though she had all at once grown years older. The sheriff stepped back a bit, and a fumbling hand found and removed his hat.

"Well, Miss Van Brunt," he said, "I've come on your ranch kind of sudden; but I had no intention of being rough. I was obliged to search—you ain't no objection to that, have you? I didn't aim to make no trouble for you. You're willing for us to search, ain't you?"

Hilda looked mutely to Uncle Hank.

"Sure, she's willing," assented the old man. "Hil-

da's not very tall, but she's a law-abiding citizen. If they's any help she can give you to ketch up with a criminal, she'll do it gladly."

Every trusting word was to Hilda a blow. She was keeping the presence of the fugitive a secret from Uncle Hank; she was going to do that and more. It was strange that it could be right—and yet it was. She was sorry for the old man, with a great rush of compassion which she herself could not understand. She caught his arm and clung to it, rubbing her cheek against his sleeve—but she never wavered in her determination to tell him nothing.

"I had to foller my duty, wherever it led," Daniels continued, defensively.

"Whoo—ee! Whoo—ee!" came a hail from the man posted down by the gate.

They turned to hearken.

"Come on, boys. Nothing doing there. Billy's got the track of that pony up yonder in the road."

Without a word, the sheriff and his men ran to their horses, and in a moment's time there was no reminder of their presence or their errand left but a little dust.

Uncle Hank and Hilda stood alone. The old man brought his gaze back from following the last departing rider, and it encountered the queer little figure beside him. He took her by the shoulder, looked a bit anxiously in her face, and said:

"I was hunting for you, Pettie, to tell you that I may not be home to-night before ten o'clock. Shorty's getting cattle ready for shipment, out in the Spring Creek pasture, and like's not I'll have to stay at the camp there till late. But this pesky business of Sheriff Daniels coming up this-a-way—you going to be afraid here alone in the house with just old Sam Kee?"

“Oh, no, Uncle Hank—not a bit afraid!” she cried.

“Don’t feel as if any skulking Door-imps or Barrel-tops would be likely to pester you? Reckon mebbe Daniels and his men has scared away all that sort of cattle—hey?”

Hilda laughed a little nervously, yet relieved—why what a world away was the girl who had been afraid of such things!

“I’ll be all right,” she declared. “I’ve got something—I’ve got a—”

“—A story to read,” supplied Hank, out of ample experience. And, with a sense of guilt upon her, Hilda let the matter go at that.

And it turned out to be a story after all, only she heard it instead of reading it.

CHAPTER XIV

SOME ONE RIDES AWAY

PEARSE came on Sunday. That was great luck. Great luck, too, that Uncle Hank should have happened to be at the house when the sheriff rode in with his posse. He might just as likely have been out somewhere on the range; for though he tried to keep Sunday on the Three Sorrows, where the business of life deals with living creatures—cattle—there will be acts of necessity and mercy—the ox to be gotten out of the ditch, and that sort of thing. But he'd been there, and he'd saved the day, for her and for Pearse—though he didn't know it himself. Then, as soon as he'd done so, Hilda did wish he'd go off to the Spring Creek pasture and leave her the place clear. Yes, she'd heartily wished that—and never noticed that it was the first time in all her life that Uncle Hank's presence had, for any reason, been unwelcome.

She had finally to take her chance, while he was in the house, to steal down to Pearse to tell him all about the sheriff and set his mind at rest.

"Well," he said quietly, "if they're thrown off the track for a little while, that ought to be enough. I didn't do what they think I did. They'll find the right man. It was this way, Hilda: I camped Friday night out toward Wild Horse canyon, with three men. - I didn't very much like their looks and they weren't giving any names."

"How did they look, Pearse? Describe them," Hilda interrupted; and when he'd done so, they were

identified in her mind as Fayte Marchbanks's three Romero cousins. Some time during the night Pearse's horse got away. He felt sure now that one of those three men must have taken off the hobbles and turned it loose, or more probably led it to some near-by place of hiding and picketed it on a short rope, for in the morning they all got out and helped him hunt for it, and that hadn't been the way they acted the night before, by any means. Also they talked a great deal about feeling to blame for the loss of his mount and wanting to help him out. So they gave him a led pony that they had with them, explaining that it had a broken shoe and he'd better ride easy, turn in at the first ranch he came to which had a blacksmith's outfit and get the pony re-shod. He did this, but fortunately before he'd told that ranchman his errand, the man offered him the information that a sheriff's posse was out after cattle thieves and that, in lifting the cattle, these thieves had killed a man and stolen a pony with a broken shoe.

He saw the plot then, but it was too late to turn back. He rode all day Saturday, trying to push on to the Three Sorrows. Finally, Saturday night, he abandoned the pony whose broken shoe left a trail that the officers would follow, and in the morning had drifted in, across pastures, to the bank by the spring at the *asequia*, when he looked up and saw two black eyes staring at him right out of the side of a hill.

Hilda had brought down needles and thread and was doing her best to make a neat job of mending his coat while they talked.

"Where's Burch?" Pearse asked suddenly, as they heard the thin, penetrating echo of Sam Kee's gong from upstairs and Hilda got unwillingly to her feet. "He must be a good-sized boy by now. Think maybe

you'd better tell him about me? He could help you, couldn't he?"

"Burch is in Fort Worth with Aunt Val," said Hilda, and was thrillingly glad it was so—that she, Hilda, alone, could do anything for the blessed Boy-On-The-Train. "Aunt Val's the aunt I told you about, that came out after you people had left Denver. Papa sent for her to come to Texas with us. She doesn't like it on the ranch. I must run now. Are you all right? I'll bring you down some supper. Sam Kee will give it to me. Sam was splendid with the sheriff."

As Hilda had expected, the Chinaman was willing enough to give her a good meal for her fugitive, but before she got it smuggled down to him she almost hated Uncle Hank for being so much in the way. There was the later adventure of stealing down with some bedding, and assuring Pearse that he'd be free of the house as soon as Uncle Hank left. He seemed deathly tired and almost careless of what might come if he could only rest.

That was Sunday night. And after Sunday—Monday comes. You can't help it. It's just that way. They string the days of the week together without any regard for people's feelings—or even the necessities of the case. How could she go to school on Monday and leave Pearse there hidden in the cyclone cellar? Of course, Sam Kee would never tell; also, the Chinaman had furnished food enough to last through the day. But it was like parting soul from body to ride away from the Three Sorrows that morning, to turn her back on what might chance, to give up hours with her fugitive that might have been hers.

At school, Miss Belle found she had a strange Hilda in her classes. The banner pupil was inattentive; no

statement seemed to get through to that mind, which her teacher knew to be usually so quick. A book before her, motionless, apparently scarcely breathing, Hilda sat at her desk, the image of a very studious little girl. But she did not use the slate and pencil that lay under her hand; she did not see the printed lines before her. What if the ranch house at the Three Sorrows should burn down while she was away? It was a stone house—but couldn't stone houses burn? The things in them could, anyhow. What if Sam Kee fell suddenly ill and, in his extremity, "confessed all" to Uncle Hank? What if she, Hilda, were thrown from her pony on the way home and broke a leg—no, turned an ankle—that was more like the girls in stories—well, what if she turned an ankle and lay helpless and couldn't get down to see after Pearse? What would become of him?

Her mind flew wildly to her aunt. If Miss Val had been at home would she have dared to trust her with Pearse's secret? Aunt Val hadn't met Mr. and Mrs. Masters, but they were her sort of people; she would think that a boy brought up as Pearse had been couldn't be a cattle thief. Well—Uncle Hank would think so too if he knew Pearse. But there' was that way Pearse had looked when he heard Uncle Hank's name. She tried to forget it. It was too bad when people you were so fond of wouldn't like each other.

And of course it had to be that afternoon that visitors came to the school. It was only Mrs. Capadine and the new Capadine foreman's wife; but Miss Belle wanted to show off the school, so she called on Hilda Van Brunt, as she always did at such times. And Hilda disgraced herself. Worse—she disgraced Miss Belle and the school. Three times she said "I don't

know," and one of those times the question was such that any baby would have known the answer. Miss Belle was asking it that way to make it easy.

As a last resort Hilda's teacher called on her to recite—"speak a piece" they called it when they mentioned it on the playground. You'd think that was the thing she could do in her sleep. She loved Friday afternoons because of the speaking. She now, standing in front of them all, dashed nervously into:

"The stag at eve had drunk his fill—"

Then, suddenly, her mind jumped three miles and a half. What was Pearse doing? Had they found him? She came back, with a jerk, to the schoolroom, looked down at the faces of her schoolmates as they sat at their desks, arms folded, listening; at the plump, expectant ladies in the chairs. Then she repeated her statement about the stag. Three times she said it; that stag, if he was full the first time, must have been quite dangerously filled when she got to the next line—

"As danced the Moon on Monan's rill."

Well, even then it would have been all right; she might have gone on from there. But there was a snicker all over the room, and she realized that she had said "Ronan's mill." Even the visiting ladies were laughing at her. She burst into tears and sat down, hiding her face in her arms on the desk top. She heard Miss Belle—Miss Belle, angry and mortified—telling her that she would have to stay after school!

Nothing to do about that. She just sat with her head on her desk and cried and cried. The company

left. The other scholars all filed out—Miss Belle was letting them go a little early—Hilda heard them getting on their ponies, riding away. Then Miss Belle came and sat down in the seat beside her and put her arm around her, saying, more kindly:

“What’s the matter, Hilda? You’re not a bit like yourself to-day.”

“Oh, Miss Belle,” Hilda’s face, all swollen with tears, came up; she laid hold of the ruffle on Miss Belle’s shoulder with shaking fingers; “oh, Miss Belle—let me go home. I—I’ll do anything for you—if you’ll only let me go home—now.”

“Why, Hilda,” the teacher was only a big girl herself, “I believe you’re sick. Do you feel bad? Is that it?”

“I feel awful,” choked Hilda, and didn’t mean to be untruthful; but she knew afterwards how Miss Belle understood that. “If you’ll just let me go home, Miss Belle—it’ll be all right. Let me go, please.”

“In a minute.” Miss Belle got up and hurried to her desk and began writing something. She came back, folding it, asking anxiously, “Do you think you can stand the ride home, Hilda? I hate to send you alone. Want me to go with you? I will, if you need me. It’s out of my way, and I’ve written to Mr. Pearsall—but if you think you need me—”

“Oh, no, Miss Belle. I’m all right.” Hilda was on her feet, reaching for the note for Uncle Hank. “Yes’m, I can ride home all right. Oh—thank you, Miss Belle!”

“Well,” the teacher stood in the door watching the streaking figure of a little girl on a pony vanishing down the trail toward the Three Sorrows, “well—if that was any one else but Hilda Van Brunt I’d say she was putting it all on to get sent home. Maybe I

needn't have said three days—but Mr. Pearsall will know when he sees her."

Oh, the confidence of the grown-up world that the youngsters they care for and look after are so easily understood! Hank, peering over his spectacles from Miss Belle's little note, in which she said she found Hilda nervous and overexcitable, was afraid she wasn't well, and thought maybe she'd better be kept home from school for two or three days' rest, saw before him a Hilda whose eyes were big and almost wildly bright, whose cheeks flamed with unusual color. He laid two fingers against the hot curve of one.

"Feverish, Pettie?" he suggested.

"Aunt Val would say I had a temperature." Hilda laughed a little excitedly. She hadn't had to tell any story. All she needed to do was to keep still and let them fool themselves. She wouldn't have done it for her own sake—but for her fugitive down there in the cyclone cellar anything was fair.

For five days Hilda stayed at home from school; and the boy, Pearse Masters, lay hid in the cyclone cellar. Hilda heard through the boys that Sheriff Daniels was still searching for him. It seemed the trap the Romero boys—if it was they—had laid with that broken-shoed pony still deceived the officers of the law. And Hilda's behavior these days was queer enough to make Uncle Hank feel that she needed to be at home rather than in school. Most of the time when she was upstairs her heart was in her mouth, as the saying is, or anyhow so close to her mouth that it jumped right into it if some one spoke suddenly to her. The feeding of her captive, planning for his comfort, scouting for his safety, kept her at a nervous tension.

Pearse wasn't nervous; he stood being cooped up in

that little dark hole all day wonderfully. Whenever the coast was clear, and all the men off the place, she hurried down to him. She had scoured the office for checker and chess board, packs of Authors, a puzzle game or two that ought to be lying about somewhere. But mostly she and Pearse would just talk. To the girl of thirteen, this Boy-On-The-Train was, of course, different from the one she remembered as so wonderful, from the figure that had lived in her recollection all those years, having added to him a great many things that hardly belonged to a real, flesh-and-blood boy. He was a more experienced person than Hilda might have expected; he was as tall as a man, and better-looking, Hilda decided, than any one she had ever seen. He had an awfully interesting disposition; he could be merry and full of fun—but as hard as flint, too. He got that hard look in his eyes whenever she mentioned Uncle Hank. Well, then, the best way was not to talk about Uncle Hank to him at all. So they played checkers and told stories, and Pearse sent her upstairs for books she'd told him were on the shelves up there, but she hadn't thought she'd like. And he read aloud to her from some of them—and, oh, she did love them!

But the one thing that was always right between Hilda and Pearse was their feeling for this beautiful plains country of the West. They both loved it! Like her, Pearse would rather ride than anything in the world. She was crazy to have him see the Three Sorrows in daylight; for you couldn't get any idea of things at night, which was the only time he had to get out and move about; and, of course, he couldn't have got any real view of the place that day he came in over it, afoot, half starved, parched with thirst, thinking only of some place to hide.

Finally, she did get Sam Kee to keep watch, when everybody else was out of the way, and she took Pearse out through the front door, all the way down the box-elder avenue to the trail, back again, around by way of the *asequia*, past the spring and the kitchen garden, to the corrals and stables, and out into the home pasture, where some of the best horses were.

He praised it all, as she had been so eager to hear him do. And Hilda had been anxious, without saying a word of the sort, to show him how well Uncle Hank managed and took care of them all. She was the more urgent about this, since she felt, down deep in her heart, that she didn't actually want Pearse to meet Uncle Hank—this time. He'd come back some day, when all the tangles had been straightened out, and then—it was breathless, exciting to have him all her own guest, her responsibility—but, oh, she loved it!

And the long talks in the cyclone cellar, when he told her how he came to be adrift here in the western cattle country, heading for a job over on a New Mexico ranch—they were like chapters out of a story—a much more fascinating story than any in the books.

When he and Hilda saw each other last, he'd been a rich man's son, just back from Europe, where he had been traveling with his parents. Now both Mr. and Mrs. Masters were dead.

"They weren't my real parents, you know, Hilda," he explained. "I was only an adopted son."

Hilda's heart gave a little bound; the wandering heir—the prince in disguise—was an adopted son. Pearse was going on:

"They had other children—grown and married. We'd traveled around a lot, in Italy and Switzerland. My tutor went with us. We lived in England a while, and a while in Italy; and one whole summer in Ire-

land; and in those places I went to school. Gee!" she heard a little gulp, "I was happy then. But Father got called home on some important business, and the next day after we landed in New York he was killed—in a street-car accident."

"Papa was killed in a roundup," murmured Hilda.

"Taken suddenly that way," Pearse went on, "his business was left all at loose ends. Mother went to live with her married daughter. I felt I couldn't go there—except to see her. They didn't like me. Well—I guess they hated me."

"Why would they?" Hilda bristled.

"Natural enough," said Pearse easily. "I suppose they'd never wanted Father and Mother to adopt me—a poor little rat running away from an uncle that beat him."

He laughed when he said that, but Hilda's eyes were full of tears.

"Mother was sick when she went to Nelly's house," he went on. "She died within the month. I felt then that there wasn't anything in the East for me. I belong to the West, Hilda—same as you do. Father had owned a share in that cattle company in New Mexico. He always said that he intended to leave it to me—or give it to me—but now I couldn't find out a thing about how it was left. Nelly's husband and George had everything in their hands. Anyhow, I felt sure that Father's name would get me a job on the J I C, if I could get to them. I sold my watch and my books and some other things to get the railroad fare, depending on my own work to make good with the company, once I had the job. Had a fine opinion of myself, didn't I?—a fellow that would let himself be taken in by such a bunch as the three I camped with that night, and get set afoot on the bald plain, with

the sheriff after him—have to sneak in to a little girl like you for help! Hilda, you're a lot better at cattle-country business than I am."

"I'm not, Pearse. I just know the ways out here a little better. And I don't know them so very well. Maybe, after all, you'll let me go to Uncle Hank and ask—"

She stopped there. The blue eyes that had been laughing were suddenly full of anxiety; the voice, too, was anxious as Pearse said:

"You've been awfully good to me, Hilda—a regular brick in every way. Now you won't go and spoil it all by—" He broke off, frowning. Hilda stared at him apprehensively. Finally, he said:

"I'll make a bargain with you; no use pretending that I like the man you call Uncle Hank, or that I enjoy the idea of meeting him again. But I will some time. I'll come back some time when I can walk up the front steps. I'd never have sneaked in here to hide if I'd known he was manager of the ranch; but as I have done so, and found you again, Hilda, and we're such good friends—I'll come back. Now let's forget it."

Words wouldn't come. Hilda felt sure that if she'd tried to make them, tears would, instead. She just shook her head silently. That might have meant anything. Pearse seemed to think that it meant she agreed to what he said.

"All right;" the gruffness and rasp were out of his voice now. "Let's just talk about ourselves, then. When I get over to New Mexico I'll write back to you. You and I aren't going to quarrel because of any one else—are we? We'll always be great friends."

"Oh, always—always!" That was what Hilda said, with all her heart—and wondered at herself a little for

saying it. How could she be friends with one that wasn't friends with Uncle Hank? Yet she must be—she must. And maybe, some day, when she and Pearse had been good friends for a long while, she'd get him to think differently about Hank—she'd be the peacemaker between them. Anyhow, there wasn't much time now—she couldn't waste any of it arguing with herself.

She got Shorty—Shorty was close-mouthed, and he seldom asked questions—to shoe her pony Sunday on his front feet, and the night upon which they had agreed that Pearse must get away she used the utmost of her influence with Sam Kee to get the necessary provision of food. She had a little money—her small hoard toward the joys of Christmas. It was eleven o'clock when she was able at last to slip down cellar and bring back her guest. They had a night of white moonlight for the enterprise, such a night as only the high plains country ever sees. It appeared that every object was as clearly visible as by day, yet all was subtly changed, flooded with mysterious beauty.

The low, spreading ranch-house silently brooded its sleepers; but cottonwood leaves whispered loud in a light night breeze above the little stream that flashed its myriads of sparkles back to the moon. The Willow Nixies over by the tank were dimly visible, bowing down as at some magic affair of their own. Suddenly, upon the lonely stillness, a mocking bird gave voice. Up from deep, deep, ancient wells that song bubbled, liquid, divine. The boy stood a moment and hearkened, Hilda watching, breathless, furtive. He made an impatient gesture and moved on. Without a word, the Sunday horse was led out from where Hilda had tied him. She went to a peg on which hung a handsome saddle, bridle and saddlecloth.

"They were papa's," she said.

"All right;" Pearse spoke with some difficulty. In silence he bridled the pony, saddled him and made the bundle of provisions fast by means of the long tie-strings. "I'll take them, Hilda. I've got to. But I'll send them back as soon as I can."

"Oh, no—" Hilda was beginning, but he interrupted her:

"What'll you say to Mr.— What'll you say to your Uncle Hank?"

She trembled a little at that, but answered with reasonable steadiness:

"I think I'll ask him not to make me tell him anything about it. I never have asked Uncle Hank that, but he'll do it for me. Here—you must have this."

Her little brown hand was putting some coins into his, and he caught the fingers and closed them, distress, reluctance, in look and action.

"I hate to take your money," he broke out.

Hilda's face raised to his, white in the moonlight, seemed more than ever all eyes, as they slowly filled with tears. The many-hued, gleaming cloak of romance was slipping from her; she began to feel the chill of naked realities. In vain she strove to have it that she was arming her prince for the fray, defending her fugitive, making good his escape; she could not think one thought or draw one breath as Kate Barlass, as Flora MacDonald, or any of the rest of that devoted throng. She was just herself—her own small, lonely self—out behind the corral with Pearse, unknown to all the sleeping household; and it was the last time she would be there with him. He was going away from her. A little money—what did it matter, one way or the other?

"Oh, you must take it—you must!" she protested,

the choke of rising emotion in her tone. "I wish it was more. There's only two dollars and thirty-five cents."

His voice failed huskily. He stood looking at her a moment, as though he would have said more; then, without a word, shook his head, turned, and his foot was in the stirrup. The realization that this was good-by reached its climax in Hilda's heart. He was really going away. Like a big, black, engulfing wave rolled over her the thought of the time coming when there would be no Pearse to talk to or read with, to feed or care for; no delicious hiding and intriguing enterprises—nothing but the round of ranch and school life. Blindly, she caught at his sleeve.

"Oh, don't! Don't go! Come back in the house."

A whirlwind of sobs shook the slim figure, and Pearse hastily, awkwardly, put his arm about her to steady her.

"Let's tell Uncle Hank!" she gasped. "He'll explain to the sheriff and those men. He can. You'd better stay here, Pearse."

She looked up into his face in the dimness, and knew, before he spoke, that he was going to refuse.

"Hilda—I can't. If I'd known he was manager here, I'd never have come in the first place. I told you that. If ever I see you again— Oh, say, Hilda! don't cry so. I just can't stand to see you feel so badly."

She dried her eyes with piteous eagerness and strangled the sobs that still shook her.

"Goo-good-by, Pearse. Good-by—and good luck," she achieved without a break. "You've got it all clear in your mind about the trail?"

"All clear. Good-by," answered the boy hoarsely. And, not venturing another look at her, he rode away.

CHAPTER XV

NO QUESTIONS ASKED

HILDA stood there, chilled and shivering, and listened to the sound of his horse's hoofs, cautious and slow at first, breaking into a canter further away and dying out in the night air. He was gone, leaving her utterly bereft. For, in the presence of the living Pearse himself The Boy-On-The-Train had at once shrunk and faded to a vain shadow—oh, no, she could never call that up again. She had lost them both.

She turned stumblingly toward the house. Halfway there, blinded by her tears, she walked almost into Uncle Hank!

“Pettie!” he said. “Why, Pettie—it’s you?”

With the strangest movement, a perfect anguish of reluctance, the child who flew to meet him whenever she saw him coming, who ran to him with all her troubles and perplexities, approached. The poor little feet lagged at every step. Plainly they would rather have turned and fled. The eyes beseeched, apologized. The trembling hands went out and made movements of dumb entreaty. For one instant he was confused by memory of her fear of the sheriff; then, like a knife in his heart, came the clear knowledge that she was afraid—of him! For some reason beyond his understanding, she did not want to come to him. Yet come she did, and the man, moved, as it seemed to him, beyond the occasion, gathered her up in his arms,

just as he had been used to do when she was six years old and went to sleep on his breast. He carried her in to the living-room, sat down on the couch there and, loosening his arm a bit so that he might look in her face, said:

"Pettie, I was scared about you, honey. Don't you want to tell Uncle Hank? Can't Uncle Hank help you?"

Hilda was resolute not to cry. She straightened up in the circle of his arm and lifted to him brimming eyes.

"Uncle Hank," she began desperately, "Father's dead—he's gone."

"Yes. Why, yes, dear," said Hank gravely. "He's been gone five year. We have to get over it when our folks die and leave us. The world wouldn't get on without we did."

"I know. It isn't— What I mean is that, now he's gone, we're all there is left of him. We've got to do what he would if he was here—isn't that so?"

"That's so."

"Well—he always helped people that were in trouble, didn't he?"

"He sure did, Pettie. Your pa was as good as gold. He was the dearest father a little girl ever had. What he done when he was here, and what he would do if he was here now, would always be right for you to pattern by."

Hank was puzzled on some points, but very clear as to what he wanted Hilda to understand on this. He was glad to see that his words were a relief to her.

"Then" (she was feeling her way, plainly with some secret difficulty in explaining herself), "if somebody came to you or me in trouble—in very dreadful trouble—some one that had been trying to get to father—"

some one that depended on him—that didn't know he was dead and couldn't help him—”

The big, black eyes, so like Charley's own, held steadfastly to Uncle Hank's attentive glance; they never wavered, till he bent down and laid his cheek upon her curls.

“You needn't say another word, Pettie—nary another word. You've got just as good a right to keep your affairs to yourself as I've got, or as any other man's got. If I can help you—if you want anything from Uncle Hank—just tell me so. Let me know what it is.”

“It's awful good of you, Uncle Hank,” said Hilda. She debated with herself a moment in silence, then took it with a brave rush. “You mustn't ask me where the Sunday pony's gone, nor papa's saddle and bridle.”

Hank plainly was startled, but he got his breath and came back gallantly with:

“I won't, honey. By the holy poker—this is your own business! I don't see why it ain't—just as much as if you was a man a hundred and thirteen years old, instead of a little girl only thirteen.”

Hilda had all along assured herself, almost feverishly, that Uncle Hank would understand; but now, climbing the stairs to bed, looking back over her shoulder to where he sat, the sense of his forbearance was like a pang in her heart. She'd done something she dared not tell Uncle Hank. She'd deceived him. And she had done it for a boy who didn't like Uncle Hank—who, for some strange, unaccountable reason seemed almost to hate him! Well, that had to be. But now she would make up to him for it. Never again—not on any other subject, anyhow—would she keep anything back from him. But Pearse—she knew if Pearse

needed it she would again deceive the old man. It was very strange and puzzling; it hurt her.

She fell asleep, finally, then waked to the startling thought—that she'd put Uncle Hank second. He'd always been first. Well—she couldn't help that, either.

CHAPTER XVI

“TWEN-TY—SEV-EN—HUN-DRED—CAT-TLE!”

SHERIFF DANIELS clung resolutely to the trail of that broken-shoed pony. He discovered, finally, who the man was that had ridden it away from the ranch where it was stolen. The thief was traced into old Mexico, then into a little place in Arizona, brought back from there, tried and convicted of that and of the killing. Every one supposed that it was he who had been at the Three Sorrows that day. His trial brought out the fact that the Romero brothers were the others in the affair. They disappeared from Lame Jones County and stayed away.

The matter was cleared up now; Pearse Masters could have come back openly now, if he'd wanted to. But he didn't—he didn't even write. A whole year rolled round, and Hilda had heard nothing from him or of her Sunday pony. Yet in the cattle country, where the distances were so great, people sometimes borrowed a horse and kept it for more than a year, waiting for the time when it would be convenient to return it by some friend traveling in the necessary direction.

Of course, feeling as he did about Uncle Hank, Pearse himself would never ride up to the Three Sorrows leading Sunday. Yet, in her own mind, Hilda never gave up the hope that some time she would find a way to bring the two together and make them friends. Nobody, she felt sure, could really know Uncle Hank and not love and trust him.

As time went on, and there was no Pearse and no word from him, and here was Uncle Hank, more than ever part of everything good and comfortable, Hilda slipped into a position of even greater confidence with him. It was as though she tried to make up to him for having liked—for still so very much liking—a person who thought badly of him. Those long talks on the doorstone in the evening would have surprised some people. Hank laid all his plans and ideas before the slim girl as he never would have thought of doing before her father. Hilda was going to be a ranchwoman. The Sorrows would belong to her and to her brother. She loved it all; she had the feeling for it; and the old man believed that a sense of responsibility could only come with a knowledge of what the responsibilities were.

So, in March of the year when Hilda was fourteen, she knew as well as Hank did what the financial situation was on the ranch, and why it had come to a point where her guardian was almost at his wit's end to go on. He had saved everywhere he could, doing with less help than he needed always, getting more out of his men by good treatment, making up the lack by extra work of his own, buying supplies with careful judgment, hesitating over every expense except those that Miss Valeria demanded—no use hesitating with Aunt Val; she always got what she wanted in the end. But the Sorrows had never been able to run enough cows, as the cattle country phrased it. Hank had helped out wherever he could by taking other men's stock to pasture, “on the shares,” or “for the third calf.” He had paid off the smaller mortgage and kept up the interest on the larger one.

He stood one afternoon near the side door of the ranch house, gazing out across the fields of the Sor-

rows, green as an emerald and sweet with the evening song of meadow larks. Hilda came up to him, slipped her hand into his and looked up into his face as though she had said, "What is it, Uncle Hank?"

"Pasture for ten thousand cattle," he sighed, "and I reckon we're a-doing well if we can count up twenty-eight hundred in all. Well, honey, we'll make out somehow—we always have made out so far—but I wish the Lord would show me how."

A big, six-mule freight wagon was just pulling up at the lower gate. They watched with interest while Slew-foot Crosby, the freighter, climbed down from the driver's seat and started toward the house. When Slew caught sight of the two he raised a letter in his hand and shook it high above his head.

"Howdy, Hilda. Hey, Pearsall; I brought this out from Dawn for you!" he shouted.

"Hmm," said Hank, "who'd be writing to me? Miss Valeria's home, and Burch."

Drawing up, Crosby handed him the envelope and waited to share any interest that might be in its contents.

Pearsall turned the letter over curiously a time or two.

"Looks like I ought to know that there handwriting," he meditated, scratching one ear reflectively. "Now, who in time is it makes them kind of tails to the—? Hm-mm. El Capitan," he squinted at the postmark. "Huh—El Capitan. Well, I don't know as—"

"Why don't you open it?" suggested Hilda, and Crosby winked at her and added:

"Yes, rip 'er up and have a look at the inside."

Without further ado, Hank inserted his thumb and "ripped her up." Carefully he drew forth and un-

folded a soiled, dog-eared sheet of paper and stood studying it for some moments in silence, Hilda watching, Slew shifting from one foot to the other. Gradually the manager's face changed, losing its anxious lines, taking on a half-surprised, half-incredulous expression. He looked out again over the green levels.

"Lord! Lord!" he whispered. "Why, this almost scares me."

"What, Uncle Hank? What?" demanded Hilda, and the patient Crosby thanked her with a glance.

"All right, Pettie. Ye see, Slew, this here's from my old pardner, Tracey Jacox, that I used to run cattle with down yonder on the Pecos. He—Trace, he's had some difficulty there at Capitan. He's wrote for me to come and get his bunch of cattle and keep 'em—that is, till he—"

"Till he gets out," supplied Crosby, with prompt intelligence.

"Well, yes—till he gets out," assented the other mildly.

Crosby's eyes followed Pearsall's across the tremendous sweep of green pastures. He knew well what was in the manager's mind.

"Comes in mighty good. I brought you something worth while this time, didn't I? Well, so long! I got to pull my freight."

He walked away down the long line of box elders to his patient mules. Left behind, the old man stood murmuring over and over: "Twen-ty—sev-en—hun-dred—cat-tle! Twen-ty—sev-en—hun-dred! Why, Pettie, it looks like a hand stretched right down to a drowning man. For, as sure as my name's Pearsall, I didn't know which-away to turn this spring."

"And we're to keep the cattle how long, Uncle Hank?"

The old man took out the penciled scrawl, and she read with him:

El Capitan, Sandoval Co., Texas,
March 28, 18—.

Mr. dere Hank Pearsall,

Ime in a little trubble and I write to know if you are thare at the Sorers if so would like to have you come imediatly and git my bunch of catel. Ime in a little trubble. he was a poplar man and the jury was pretty strong for hanging but my lawyer was a good one and I will be glad if you can come imediatly. Thare is 2700 of the catel most all grade Herefords and you can keep them on the Sorers thare till I get out that will be four years and I know Hank you will do right by me. my lawyer is pade and I want to see the catel in your Hands before I go and I will be glad to see you imediatly the sooner the better.

Your old pardner,

Tracey Jacox.

“Reckless feller!” muttered Hank, and shook his head. “I always told him he’d shoot up the wrong man some time.”

He put the letter carefully back into his pocket, and they went to the house together.

That evening it was known at headquarters, and by the next morning it had flown all over the Sorrows that the boss was going to take an outfit down the trail to Sandoval County and bring home the herd.

“We’ll have to have, at the very least, twelve riders and a horse wrangler,” he said. “I’ll be cook and foreman both—that’s fourteen men in all. Four of us’ll go from here, and I’ll hire ten men in Sandoval. It’ll take a hundred and twenty-five horses to handle that trail herd—and *I’ve got ’em!* Ain’t I glad now I kept all the ponies! It sure took nerve to do it. I’ll

not have to buy a horse—not one. I feel like patting myself on the head for my smartness. Pettie, I'll give you that job of patting. You might start on it right away.”

“How long will you be gone, Uncle Hank?” Hilda asked, in a voice whose utterance seemed somehow to displace very little ordinary atmosphere.

“Well, it won't take more'n four or five days to get there—flying light. Then there's the counting, road-branding, signing up contracts, hiring the new hands and getting supplies—I reckon it'll take nearly two weeks to make the trip home with the herd. Say, jest about three weeks in all, Pettie.”

“Oh—three weeks!” whispered Hilda, and he looked at her curiously, but said nothing more.

Such an outburst of vitality the ranch had not known for years. There was an inspiring rush of preparation, a great looking to stirrup leathers, re-cinching of saddles, mending and overhauling of equipment, and almost more skylarking and horse-play. Out at the corrals, Shorty and two other boys who were to make the trip, stole up behind one another and knocked each other sprawling by way of a delicate intimation that the situation was humorous. They scuffled and rolled over and over like bear cubs, hammering one another joyously. All day, while working furiously, they turned again and again from their occupation to fight at the trembling of an eyelash. Shorty came wheezing out of one of these encounters with a black eye and bleeding knuckles, the shirt on his back torn to strips. But his only complaint was:

“Darn you, Buster—this is the best shirt I got,” with the husky threat, added, “I'll wear you to a frazzle—when I get my breath.”

Burch and Miss Valeria were the only ones who

seemed to be out of it all. The little lady looked up mildly once or twice at the extra amount of noise and bustle going on about her, then relaxed into her book or the endless piece of Battenburg which never seemed to get itself finished under her slim, aristocratic white hands. Burch was a silent boy, who cared enough about his books to have made a very good student and whose deportment would always have been rated one hundred if he hadn't had such a queer way of taking an idea into his head, saying nothing about it, and putting it into execution—whatever it was—without any one's permission.

There was the time when the school clock got out of order, and Burch took it out of its case to oil it. Miss Belle caught him with it just when he dipped it in a bath of kerosene. He wouldn't say he was sorry. It went on all morning till the young teacher said she was going to whip him—and expel him from school. Even that didn't move Burch to say anything but:

“I wish you'd let me oil the clock now and put it back in the case and put the hands on. It'll run all right now.”

But Miss Belle wouldn't even do that, and Hilda, crazy with anxiety, had ridden after Uncle Hank, begging him to come quick and not to let Aunt Val know. She'd been locked out of the school room. She thought Miss Belle was in there whipping Burchie. Miss Belle wouldn't listen to her when she told her he was always learning about machinery; and maybe he really could fix the clock.

She and Uncle Hank had come into the school room to find a boy that had been whipped, a clock that was ticking away in good order—and a teacher who was hysterical.

“He ought to have told me that the watchmaker

there in Fort Worth had showed him what to do—let him help him at such things,” she said.

Uncle Hank agreed to that, but when they were climbing on their ponies to leave, Burch said:

“Aw—people talk too much. Anyhow, she didn’t *ask* me if any one had taught me how to fix a clock. I told her I could do it. After she whipped me, she cried and let me show her. She doesn’t hit very hard. It didn’t hurt very much.”

“And you see, Burch,” Uncle Hank put in, “you shouldn’t never have touched the clock without permission. Long as you done that, I’m glad to see you are willing to take a licking for it.”

This was Hilda’s brother, very dear to her, yet caring for almost none of the things she cared for. He wasn’t interested in ponies—because they were live creatures, not machines.

“But you’re going to live on a ranch when you grow up,” Hilda argued.

“No, I’m not. I think I’ll be an engineer of some kind. I’d like building bridges. You can stay here and be the ranchman.”

And so it was only Hilda who, drifting about the house or garden, lingering at the corral, like a little weebegone shadow, took no part in the joy. She followed Hank as though she could not let him from her sight, hastening to bring what he needed before he asked for it, stooping to pick up a thing he dropped, anticipating his wish with a low-spoken word. He was used to having Hilda hang about him—but not this Hilda. Also she was getting to be of a size and age when she very commonly had some more or less important concerns of her own which took her apologetically from him at intervals. Now, whatever he was doing, he knew she was there; he was aware of just

the look he would meet in those dark eyes if he glanced up. If the old man wheeled suddenly and faced it, this haunter of his trail would turn aside hastily and at once be occupied with other business. But Hank knew that he was watched.

The start was to be made in the morning. After supper Hilda sat down on the side-door stone, where so many of her interviews with Uncle Hank took place, waiting for him and trying hard not to weep. He came out noisily, man-fashion, calling back some last remark over his shoulder to Shorty O'Meara, and dropping suddenly beside her with a great sigh, mingled of weariness, relief, content.

"Well, it was short notice, but we're sure ready, and we're ready good. Pettie,"—he spoke aloud and cheerfully—"I don't know as I ever in my life looked forward to anything with more pleasure than I do to going down to El Capitan and bringing back them cows."

Slowly it was borne in upon him that he was getting no response. In the silence came a choking sound. There was no need of words. He sat awhile, mute. It did occur to him that he might say, "*You* don't want to go—a little lady like you—on a long, hard, lonesome, messy trip with nobody but a lot of rough boys that can't talk a lick of grammar." But the uselessness of it, as well as the hollow insincerity, held him silent. The old man acted a mother's part by his orphans, but he possessed none of the age-honored mothers' tricks. Now he got up suddenly and went into the house, where Miss Valeria sat reading, and blurted out to that lady:

"I reckon I'm the most forsaken old fool that ever trod shoe-leather. But I can't stand it any longer. Pettie'll have to go with me down the trail."

Following close behind, as she had been following all day, Hilda heard those last words. She dared not explode into a joyous whoop, for her aunt's bewildered face promised resistance. Miss Van Brunt took off her delicate, gold-rimmed glasses nervously and rubbed her eyes, as though, perhaps, looked at without their medium, Hank might change his mind.

"I—why, really, Mr. Pearsall," she began, with her small bustle of feminine authority, "you are very kind to think of bothering yourself with the child. If it were Burch, now—but I'm afraid it's rather a long trip for a little girl—and—"

"Aw, let her go," mumbled Burch, looking up from the table, where he was busy over a book and some diagrams. "I don't want to. It suits her. She likes it."

"—and certainly not a proper sort of a trip—for a little girl."

"Burch!" Hilda exploded. "Why, Burch can't ride." Her aunt looked bewildered. "Oh, I know—he can sit up on a horse. But he wouldn't be of the least bit of use to a trail outfit, would he, Uncle Hank? And I can help you lots—can't I?"

"I didn't understand from Mr. Pearsall that you were to help with the work," Miss Valeria said severely. "I think the work must be a great deal more unsuitable for you than the trip itself."

"Oh, please, Aunt Valeria—dear Aunt Valeria!" entreated Hilda, surging up to her aunt's knee. "I'll be so good. When we come back I'll study anything you want me to, and not read so many stories."

"Well, your music—but then we've no piano," Miss Val sighed. "And I believe you said, Mr. Pearsall—"

She broke off, looking up with a slightly aggrieved expression at the tall ranch manager. She had an-

nounced to him that Hilda must have a piano, and for once Hank had been resolute in refusing to sell some ponies and purchase the instrument.

"We'll get a piano all right, now, Miss Valeria," he assured her. "Them horses, that I had the nerve to hang on to, gives us plenty for the drive. You see, it would take a hundred and twenty-five ponies to handle a trail herd of that size, and I don't know where in Texas I'd 'a' got the money to buy with right now. By next spring, if we have luck, I could set you a row of pianos plumb acrost the room."

"I hardly think we'll need more than one," Miss Valeria said, somewhat hastily. "But about Hilda—"

"Run along upstairs and pack your war bag, Pettie. We'll start soon as it's light in the morning," said Hank to the child; and Hilda flew to obey, leaving him to conclude the argument with Miss Van Brunt.

CHAPTER XVII

WITH THE TRAIL-HERD

IN the first gray of morning, a caravan swung out from the corral at the Three Sorrows. They were making a start at dawn. You can go almost anywhere if you start at dawn. Indeed, there are worlds that may be penetrated at no other hour. A group of riders were in the lead, the remuda, or saddle-band, following, herded by the wrangler; the chuck wagon, driven by Pearsall, brought up the rear; Hilda, beside Uncle Hank on the high seat, with heaven knows what dreams under the thatch of dark hair, peeping out sometimes from the clear windows of her eyes.

Early morning on the bald plain. To Hilda, moving along in its wonderful dimness, curiously the thought of Pearse Masters was almost as present as though he, and not Uncle Hank, had been beside her on the wagon seat. She remembered the long evenings together, the games they had played, the talk about books they had agreed on, the talk about books they disagreed on—one was as interesting as the other. She had so wished they might have had one ride together. Oh, if only he were riding with them now—one of Uncle Hank's hands! She'd let him be a right hand. She'd be willing to be the left. People said jokingly, when they offered it in shaking hands, that it was nearer the heart. She nestled a little toward the big arm beside her.

"Happy, Pettie?" he questioned, without looking around.

"Awfully happy."

They pushed on all forenoon, under the waxing sun, stopping at noon beside a well and windmill for dinner. And so the trip went, sleeping at night under the open sky, near lonely little Llano, where they had bought supplies; listening to the boys telling hunting and cattle stories till the big bass voices became a dream of a bumble-bee; waking in the early morning, in response to Uncle Hank's hail: "Roll out! Roll out! Roll out! All the big two-fisted fellers that hires for this trip has to get up soon of a-morning—ladies the same as gents." Then breakfast, and once more the starting on the day's journey.

They came to the outskirts of El Capitan about three o'clock on the fifth afternoon. Uncle Hank halted the outfit and took Hilda with him over to the courthouse, which also included the jail. The sheriff, a most obliging person, was, in point of fact, at that identical moment, sitting out behind the building playing checkers with Tracey Jacox. The latter, who seemed very cheerful, greeted Hank warmly and introduced the official to him as Berry Henson. Mr. Henson then courteously withdrew, saying:

"I know you gents will like to have some private talk, and I'll be right inside here if—er—I'm needed."

A lithe, black-haired, gray-eyed man, deeply weathered, Jacox had white teeth that showed often in smiles beneath a black mustache. The suggestion of him was swift, elastic, lawless, irresponsible, like a child or a pleasing animal. Hilda's pulse had quickened with the first sight of him—this careless Tracey Jacox, who had finally "shot up the wrong feller" and was taking his medicine so uncomplainingly. Now,

when he was formally presented to her, the little-girl heart in her bosom fluttered its short, fledgling wings toward him in dumb salute. Was he not in some sort a prince in misfortune, a fellow-sufferer with Pearse?

The two old partners sat down on their heels close together, cow-puncher fashion, to a long pow-wow. Hilda, looking on, thought how different they were. Uncle Hank, not more than ten or twelve years the elder, looked like Tracey's father; indeed, he looked like the father of all the world, with those kind, shrewd, tolerant eyes, that benignant brow, that air of paternal solicitude. Jacox was the typical soldier of fortune, the gamester, light-hearted and reckless—a thoroughbred cowpuncher. Hilda's eyes continued to dwell upon him with pleasure until the sheriff hove in sight, coming slowly around the corner of the building, coughing apologetically. Jacox stood up and spoke out loud to Pearsall, with emphasis:

"You have the contract drawn like I tell you—hear? Why, great Scott! I'd stand to lose the whole herd—fixed like I am—less'n I had an honest man and a mighty good friend to hold 'em and pectect my interests. You make a good thing out of it? Well, you needn't fret about that—I want you to."

"All right, Trace." Uncle Hank's answer was lower, but the little girl heard it.

"Well, that's settled," said Jacox. "Come on, Berry; we can finish our game now. Me an' Pearsall's all done."

Uncle Hank and Hilda went back to the Three Sorrows outfit, which camped on the fifth night at the Lazy W., three miles beyond Capitan.

The cattle were all rounded into a fenced pasture for tally. With a little sack of pink Mexican beans, Hilda, on her pony, was stationed to one side of the

gate, while Uncle Hank, pencil and paper in hand, held Buckskin quiet on a rise a little way inside the pasture. As the boys drove the cattle up and strung them out through the gate in single file, Hank put down a straight, upright mark for what he called "every cow-brute" that passed him. When the same cow-brute got to Hilda, she dropped a bean from the full sack into an empty one she held on the saddle horn before her. When Uncle Hank had marked down ten animals he drew a slanting line through the ten upright ones. His record was going to look a good deal like a picket fence. Hilda kept no record of tens. She was only the checker. When the herd was through into the other pasture, where the boys were rushing the road-branding, Uncle Hank would add up his tens into hundreds, and then Hilda would sit down in some quiet spot, if she could find any such, and count her beans one by one.

She was very proud of coming out within three of Uncle Hank's reckoning. She had made it three more than he did, and she told him she believed they got by him that time the new hand interrupted their work with a call from the branding-pen. He agreed, and said they'd give Trace the benefit of her count, not his.

Ten new hands had been hired for the work, and on the second day the big herd was put in motion; one of the new men drove the grub wagon, and after herd, riders and wagon were all started, Uncle Hank and Hilda rode out side by side.

"We'll swing around by way of town. I want to stop and say good-by to Trace," he told her.

At the courthouse he dismounted and went up to his partner, who was sitting with the amiable sheriff on the shady side of the jail, their chairs tilted back

against the adobe wall. Hilda saw that there was a long, speechless hand-grip; and when Hank was mounted, he wheeled again to answer the other's "Good luck!" which accompanied the free-hearted, open movement and smile of one who has no complaints to make and to whom a few years in jail comes as one of the fairly plentiful bad jokes of the cattle-country life.

A lump rose in her throat as she thought of that man of wind and sun and open plain shut away from it all for four years. Maybe, too, the "poplar man" was offensive; maybe prison would be as terrible to Jacox as it would have been to Pearse Masters. But there had been nobody to hide him and bring him food and lend him a horse. Uncle Hank, wrapped in his own somber reflections, did not see the furtive wiping of tears; and, presently, as by mutual understanding, they put their ponies to a lope and caught up with the outfit. The drive up the trail home was actually begun.

The column of cattle, with attendant riders—Hilda being one of these—strung out over a mile long. It looked like a great snake on the face of the open country, a vast snake that, day in day out, in dawn or noon or dusk, moved always north-westward, traveling with rustle and swish of twelve thousand hoofs in the short plains grass, or sending forth a murmur as of a smothered rain-storm when it inched itself over naked places; this continuous undernote punctuated and picked out by the plaintive bleating of calves; the occasional more remonstrant lowing of a steer, the clinking of stirrups or bridle bits, the squeak of saddles, the swift patter of galloping hoofs and the calling back and forth, as the boys rode up and down along the flanks of the herd.

They were up in the morning at daybreak, so as to travel as much as possible before the heat of the day.

At noon there was a long rest, with dinner, the men lying at ease to smoke afterwards, the cattle scattered out under the fewest herders, grazing. On the trip down they had scouted out and marked the route, noting places where a herd of this size could be watered, and each afternoon there was the eager looking for a curving line of growth that advertised the expected stream, or the clumps of tall cottonwoods about a carefully fenced-in spring or water-hole.

There was some rough country to be traversed. They crossed steep-sided arroyos, breaks and gulches, where lariats were attached to the back of the wagon as it plunged down, the ponies "setting back on the rope" to prevent the big vehicle from coming bodily on the mules that pulled it. Once down, the ropes were transferred to wagon-tongue and singletrees, and, with a whoop and a great whip-cracking, snorting ponies and straining mules rushed the bank ahead.

One stormy night Hilda awakened to find all about her lumbering, plunging cattle, clashing horns, yelling men and, for a few moments, cracking pistols. It seemed to her like a pandemonium—chaos—the end of the world. Later, from the safe spot under a handy mesquite where she had been placed, she dimly saw the heading back of the cattle, the milling of them round and round and, finally, their safe bedding down.

Then came, thin and airy on the night wind, the broken strains of "The Sweet Bye and Bye." Indian Joe, one of the hands hired at El Capitan, played beautifully on the mouth organ. He was riding night herd; she got snatches of the tune as he circled the quieting cattle. She fell asleep on it and waked next morning to hear the talk of Buster and a casual rider who had stopped at the camp to borrow tobacco.

"Had a stampede?" suggested the stranger, as he

rolled his cigarette, and Buster shook his head negligently above the broken stirrup strap he was mending.

"Shucks, no. They run a little—nothin' much," was his notion of last night's frightful hazards, its inhuman toil. "You're welcome, old timer," he nodded to the other's thanks. "So long!"

That drive, with its vicissitudes, its new, strange experiences, its open sky and measureless outlook, lay like a bright baldric across Hilda's childhood, dividing what went before from what came after. She watched, day by day, how the boys buckled to their labors, how they faced with a laugh all the hardships of the trip, making light of the long night watches, going without sleep sometimes in emergencies till they nodded and almost fell forward in their saddles. She heard them jeer each other mercilessly for the least mistake or shortcoming, clothing their rare praise of each other in half-sarcastic terms; she believed they would have jeered a broken leg—their own or another's. Not "be good" but "make good" was their slogan. Life was mostly a joke; a sour one or a gay one, but still a joke. The impression of unquestioning, off-hand fidelity to exacting duties, of uncomplaining bravery and good nature, was laid ineffaceably on the young spirit. The code all this contributed to build up was, inevitably, more a man's than a woman's.

Fourteen men the outfit traveled; fourteen strong they snailed the big herd across the face of northwestern Texas toward Lame Jones County. But it was the fifteenth, the limber, swift fellow, with eyes keen and bright like daggers, that was the life of all. Him they never saw, this lively comrade, this clever adversary; only his voice they heard in the deep note of the water that rolled down like a wall on the face of treacherous Maricopa, from a cloudburst above; in the thunder of

hoofs at night when skulking rustlers flapped a blanket in a steer's face and the sleeping cattle rose as one and broke away; the gleam of his eyes they caught dancing in those curious little flames that play sometimes on the tips of clashing horns, in the furious night stampede that followed; a flash of his flying hair upon the wind, or amid the dust-cloud that enwrapped the approach of a bunch of bad men or hostile Indians.

Ah, that fifteenth rider—viewless and unapparent, but vividly present—that one who, in the eighties, crossed the plains with every trail herd and gave zest and spirit to the trip, in whose company no labor, no hardship could become mean, commonplace, sordid; he who was never licked—or being so for the moment, always came again, fresher, more vigorous, more inciting, more taunting than before, whispering: "My name is Danger—come out and face me!"—the opponent with whom every man in the outfit was always eager to try a fall—the fifteenth rider rescued all from the dullness of routine, maintained men and enterprise ever upon the iris-hued border of true romance.

So faring and so companioned, they arrived within one more day's drive of the Sorrows, Hilda brown as an Indian girl, men and cattle in good shape. Yet Hank had planned the drive economically, with as few hands as he dared. This made hard work for all, and the boys were so tired that there was less talk and story-telling around the fire now; sleep was instant and deep the moment they got from their horses and into their blankets. They camped that night near the breaks of Seboyeta Creek, where there was wood, water and shelter, and Hilda's bed was tucked in by some scrub cedars. With but one more day to go, they put the herd under very light night guard, and the rest of the outfit were soon snoring. It seemed to Hilda only

a few moments later that they were all turned out by the cry:

“Herd’s on its feet and actin’ restless!”

Instantly every man grabbed his boots and ran, Uncle Hank calling to her as he rode out:

“Make a good fire, Pettie, and stay by it.”

“What do you suppose started them?” Hilda asked of Buster, who was the last to get away.

“Couldn’t say; coyote, maybe. Or it might have been no more than some one riding past cutting across here for the trail. If them long-horns were as tired as I am, they wouldn’t stampede none,” and he galloped away into the dark.

CHAPTER XVIII

SUNDAY COMES BACK

HILDA sat alone and fed the fire until its flame rose tall and strong. Over her head, the blue-black sky was spangled and netted with the great white stars of the high plains country. Hands clasped around her knees, head flung back, she studied them in a sort of musing trance. Distant and diminished, she could hear men's singing and calling, out yonder with the herd.

Suddenly, near at hand, as though it spoke right out of her fancies, yet sharp and real, a voice uttered her name. She straightened up, alert, not believing her own senses. Oh, she must have dreamed it! Her gaze dived deep into the blot of shadow on the edge of the break, from which the voice had seemed to come. There, against the deep darkness of the cedar scrub, something moved. She sat, motionless, watching. The voice came again:

"Hilda!"

"Pearse!"

Into the shaken light of Hilda's fire came stepping a tall young fellow in chaparajos and sombrero, his spurs clanking as he strode toward her. The blood checked all through Hilda's body, making it tingle; her breath seemed to stop. She jumped up and ran stumblingly toward him, pushing him back into the shadows. The year that had gone by since she hid him in the cyclone cellar was wiped out—she was still trying to hide him.

"The others mustn't see you," she whispered.

"They won't"; his voice seemed deeper than she remembered it; he was more self-reliant. "They're all over there with the cattle. My coming through must have started the herd moving. Sorry. I didn't mean to do that. I was just bringing in your Sunday pony, with the saddle and bridle; meant to turn him in to the corral at the Sorrows to-morrow night, and maybe get a word with you. How are you? How's everybody at the ranch?"

"Oh, Pearse," unconsciously Hilda was going with him toward the rope corral which held the remuda. "Just pull the saddle off Sunday and throw it in the wagon, and—and turn Sunday in here—and—and you'll stay and see Uncle Hank this time, won't you?"

"I hadn't intended to—'this time.'" Pearse repeated her words with a hint of a laugh in his voice. "You see, I've got the pony with me. He'd know in a minute all about my having been at the ranch before—hidden."

"Oh," said Hilda impatiently. "I wish you'd kept Sunday—and the saddle and bridle, too. You'd have been more than welcome to them."

But in her heart was relief. Not yet—not yet was the big secret to be told. She could still have it to dream of—all her own. Now that Pearse was here, her heart pounded way up in her throat and choked speech, but she knew that when he was gone—if he got away without any of them seeing him, there would be a precious memory added, of romance and adventure. He was speaking:

"You're a good friend, Hilda, and the pony was everything to me—got me over to New Mexico in short order. I'm sure my coming in well mounted helped me with those folks I was going to see about

my job and all. Sunday and I are mighty good pals—and I thought of you every time I looked at him—and that was every day.”

“Every day—and Sunday,” Hilda laughed softly in sheer happiness. “If you were thinking about me so much—I think you might have written. You said you would. Why didn’t you?”

“Oh, well, I’d start to,” Pearse said, rather reluctantly, “and then I’d get to thinking what if any one should get hold of my letter—open it, maybe—”

“Why, Pearse,” Hilda broke in, “Uncle Hank wouldn’t open a letter addressed to me—and he’s the only one that could—if that’s what you mean.”

“All right,” Pearse nodded. “If you think it’s safe, I’ll write. But I didn’t want him to get the idea that I’d been hanging around the ranch where he was manager, begging favors.”

“You didn’t ask favors!” Hilda burst out. “You didn’t hang around. Don’t be so—”

“I don’t know what you call it.” But he was laughing now. “I begged you into hiding me. I hung around the ranch five days. And you certainly did pile the favors on me, Hilda. You were as good as gold. I’ll never forget you for it. Anyhow, you and I are good friends, and always will be, whether we write to each other or see each other, or not. Isn’t that so?”

Hilda nodded. Pearse looked at her a little anxiously.

“I wasn’t sure I’d get to see you this time,” he said hastily, “but I wanted you to know how grateful I am. There’s a little bundle tied to the saddle horn. Something for you. Not what I’d like to give you, but the best I could get hold of on short notice.”

“For me? Oh, that was awfully nice of you!” Then she groped for some one thing of all she had so

long wanted to say—to ask—and faltered: “Where are you living now? At that place in New Mexico where you got the job? Are—are you all right?”

“Still there. Doing well, thank you, Hilda. Got three raises the first year. And I’ve heard from George and Nelly’s husband. I’m to have the share in the J I C that father promised me. Oh—and, Hilda, I ran into some people over in New Mexico that know you. Name’s Marchbanks.”

“Oh, yes. Maybelle and Fayte Marchbanks—their father’s Colonel Lee Marchbanks.”

“Those are the folks. Their ranch, the Alamositas, is next biggest after the J I C—the ranch I’m with—in Encinal County. I’ve never been to headquarters on the Alamositas, but I understand it’s a fine place. Say, Hilda”—a moment of listening—“I’ve got to get out of here.”

She held to his sleeve, and couldn’t utter a word. He hesitated, embarrassed.

“I will write to you, then, if you—if you think it’s all right. Look out for my letters. Don’t let any one else get hold of them.”

“Will you, Pearse—will you? I’ll watch for the letters. Nobody shall see them—and—oh, Pearse—must you go?”

She heard the faint sound of hoof-beats coming nearer, from the direction of the herd. The boys and Uncle Hank would be here in a minute. Pearse caught her hand with a whispered:

“There they come. Good-by.”

“Good-by,” she echoed whisperingly, then looked down at her empty hands. He was gone. The men were clattering in. She ran toward the fire, arriving just as Uncle Hank, with Buster and several of the Sandoval County men, rode up.

"Buster, I'll get that salve for you," the foreman was saying. "A rope burn is about the meanest kind of a—"

He broke off abruptly. Hilda, stooping to feed the fire in order to cover her confusion, had not noticed that he was rummaging in the wagon. Glancing up, she saw him back away from the vehicle and put his hand to his head.

"Pettie," he said softly, "come here, honey." And as she approached he added still lower: "Am I losing my wits—or is there—a—er—a saddle—?"

"Yes, Uncle Hank," Hilda whispered vehemently, laying hold of his arm. "It's father's. Sunday's come back. He's in with the other ponies."

"Oh, is he—is he, so?" echoed Hank, feebly.

"What's the matter, Pearsall?" Buster called. "Can't you find that salve?"

"Sure—it's right here. I'll fetch it in a minute," and Hank turned hurriedly back to the wagon.

But before he succeeded in finding the box of salve there was an outcry from one of the new hands.

"Say, Shorty—look here, will you—there's a strange cayuse in the remuda. We seem to have drawn another card to our hand of ponies."

Then came Shorty's voice:

"Well, I'll be jiggered! Come and see, Pearsall. Here's that Sunday horse of Hilda's that's been gone a year; done flew through the air and lit in our corral. If that don't beat the dickens!"

"That's all right, boys," Uncle Hank said. "It's all right, Shorty. A—er—friend borrowed the pony off of Pettie, and—"

"Why, yes—I allowed so," said O'Meara. "But, how in thunder, did Sunday get here now?"

"Well, the friend that borrowed him sort of hap-

pened along to-night whilst we was out working with the cows, and fetched him.”

Shorty made no reply. He only whistled a little under his breath and glanced keenly toward where Hilda stood. Hank got the salve and did up Buster's hand. He was a long time about it. If he intended to give Hilda a chance to get away without speaking to him, his pretext failed. She lingered, looking at him uneasily till he was free and turned to her.

“Well, Pettie?”

“Nothing, Uncle Hank.”

“You ought to be in your blankets and asleep. Run along, honey.”

He wasn't going to ask any questions. He wouldn't even look an inquiry. Oh, he was good—so good! And she had come short of loyalty to him. She had not defended him to Pearse. She crept to her blankets in the cedar thicket, hunched them about her mechanically and lay sleepless, staring up to where big, bright stars talked together of other matters than the affairs of mankind. She was disturbed, elated, unhappy—all in one.

The counsels of night and silence finally prevailed, and she slept. The cool wind came from a thousand miles of wandering over dim levels to ruffle her dark hair. Coyotes whimpered off on the edge of the world. Hilda slept soundly. But over near the fire a head of grizzled black-and-silver crinkles was lifted quietly from the blankets; Uncle Hank's eyes gazed across to Hilda's sleeping place long, with a puzzled, half-bewildered expression.

CHAPTER XIX

HILDA AND THE FLYING M'S

THEY came home next day at evening, everybody dog-tired, but happy. Out to the south, the men were working the cattle into the pastures. Hilda rode along up the avenue of box elders. She was glad to get home, yet it was hard to turn her back on a world in which Pearse might appear at one's camp-fire of an evening, and to take up a permanent residence in the one house it seemed impossible he should ever visit.

Burch came thumping down the drive on his pony, full of talk about his new lathe that had just come from Fort Worth and was a dandy!

"Show it to you as soon as we get to the house," he said. "Aunt Val let me set it up in the office. That makes a good place to work."

"Buddy—go see the live things we brought up from Sandoval County," Hilda laughed at him, "things that don't have to be turned out on a lathe—nearly three thousand of them. Uncle Hank and I counted—or, rather, Uncle Hank counted and I tallied; but the count stands on my tally. What do you think of that?"

Sam Kee stood grinning in the doorway to welcome her. Miss Valeria got up from her rocking chair and fluttered forward to the sitting-room door to give her grand-niece a ladylike kiss.

"My dear, how brown you are!" she exclaimed, holding the girl off a moment to look her over. "You're burnt like an Indian!"

And that was all that Miss Valeria Van Brunt could see of any change in Hilda.

With the coming in of the Jacox cattle, existence at the Three Sorrows took on a richer note. The price of beef could never rule this mortal life there quite so cruelly again.

Summer followed spring; ripened to the tan of autumn; the snow fell; it melted in the sun of spring; and so on, around the circle of the year four times, while their indiscreet owner paid his debt to justice between stone walls. On the good feed of the Sorrows, and under Hank's management, the herd increased much in value. "The third calf," which belonged to the Sorrows for their pasturage, represented a very handsome profit indeed.

In spite of his niggardliness in the matter of "language," old Hank Pearsall held his men as no other ranch manager in the neighborhood was able to do. The Texas Panhandle of that day was a frontier of drifting personalities. When you said "neighborhood," you meant several counties. The Capadine ranch, the McGregor place, the big Matador—a hacienda that had Spanish proprietors—in eleven years every one of these had shifted the personnel of its working household entirely; but on the Sorrows payroll were still old Snake Thompson, Shorty O'Meara, and Buster. Thompson, taciturn and unrelated to his kind, a sort of fragment of a human character, who seemed to show the marks of some early shipwreck of the emotions, put forward that he had "had enough wives," whatever that might mean. He had been away from the ranch only three or four times, and then briefly. It was understood among the other cow-punchers that Snake, on these excursions, prosecuted some sort of spree of his own; but no resident of Lame

Jones County had ever participated in these relaxations of the old man's.

Shorty, four years married to a young niece of Mrs. MacGregor who came out from Scotland to visit at the Cross K, had a bunch of cattle of his own and some land that adjoined both the Sorrows and the Cross K. His cattle ran with the Three S brand, and Shorty himself was as near a foreman at the Sorrows as could well have been under so active a manager as Pearsall.

Buster, a lad of eighteen when the Van Brunts arrived, had several times collected the wages due him and gone ambling away, singing, to some other job. But he had always returned. "Sumpin' about the old Sorrows that sorter draws a feller," was his explanation. He had had a number of highly interesting love affairs. Finally, by the way of answering an advertisement, he had entered upon a long, carefully concealed correspondence with a young lady somewhere in the east. When he had pursued this exciting courtship for some months, forbearing to draw a dollar of wages beyond such as went for cigarettes, he again rode away,—money in pocket. He wrote once to Hilda, who had been his only confidante, saying that he was married, that She was the loveliest, the best and the most charming being in the world, and he the happiest. When he came back, which he did nearly a year later, Buster looked much older than the lapse of time alone warranted, and he laughed less frequently and was heard, on occasion, to give utterance to some cynical opinions.

The general view of the matter came to be that Buster also had "had wives enough."

"'Cause one's a-plenty to do the trick, if she's the right sort," was old Snake's bitter comment.

Burch was a stocky boy who would never be tall, but well built. He got what he could out of the little school near the Three Sorrows. Once there was a young fellow at the McGregor ranch, a civil engineer, who taught him mathematics and said the boy was a wonder at it. He went no more to the doctor in Fort Worth.

Miss Valeria, whose hair was all white now above her dark eyes and brows, had tried once or twice to insist that he was ailing—and got laughed at for her pains, by the boy himself and by Hank. Hank, quick to note every change in his boy and girl as they grew up, had already met the new look in young Burchie's eyes. He watched for it in the countenance of his unconscious girl.

"Parents has got to face it," he sighed, unaware that he spoke aloud, one rainy day when he and Shorty and Snake were mending harness.

"Face what?" demanded Snake testily. "What in the old cat are you talking about?"

"About children," Pearsall explained. "These growing children, you don't never know where you lose 'em. Some day or other, you come up and slap your youngster on the back and commence talking free—like you've been used to—giving orders or making fun; and suddenly a lady or gentleman that you've never seen before turns around on you, with a polite look, as much as to say, 'I reckon you've got the advantage of me, sir!'"

"Well — then what?" demanded the solicitous Shorty, whose three-year-old bandit of a red-headed daughter held him in shameful subjection.

"Only one thing, as I figger it," said Hank. "Don't waste no time whining about duty, and what's due you for past care and labor. Just whirl in and court

and make much of that stranger. If it's a boy, my observation is that he mostly wants to lick you; and if it's a girl, she's keen to hide everything from you." Again he sighed. "You're a stranger to the stranger, and the circumstances is all against you. Any confidence you get you'll earn hard."

And Hilda? Hilda was seventeen now, of fair height for her years, but slim and undeveloped. The great dark eyes, with their heavy fringing and the level brows above them, were still her only marked beauty. She studied hard and was apt to stand high with her teacher; released to the playground, she ran rampant. Shorty said she was a good mixer. She rode with the unconscious courage and freedom of the cowpunchers. It never seemed to occur to her that she could not do with her pony anything that they could do with theirs. She and Uncle Hank had had some little difference of opinion from time to time in the matter of what horses she should ride, and what ones she should let strictly alone. The letting strictly alone went strongly against Hilda's grain.

About this time Uncle Hank brought home a steel blue roan—a snorting, up-headed, four-year-old whose neck had never felt a rope, whom Buster and Shorty, between them, with the genial irony of the cowpuncher, re-named Creeping Mose, because he could run like a streak of blue lightning.

"He's been let go so long that it's a question whether he'll ever be plumb gentled now," said Hank. "But he's a powerful good animal, and I took a chance on him."

Hilda, who had ridden out to meet the herd and was having dinner at the wagon, could not keep her eyes off the new horse. A smile passed between her and Uncle Hank, but nothing was said at that time,

beyond Hilda's declaration that she was coming down to the corral next day to watch the breaking.

Uncle Hank let her accompany him the next morning. At sight of the horse, head up, ears pricked, snuffing the air suspiciously, Hilda could not restrain her enthusiasm.

"Oh, Uncle Hank, I would love to have him for mine!" she whispered. "I never have had a horse that was really fast. He's not vicious—only just spirited and unbroken. I know I could ride him after the boys have topped him a few times."

"There ain't a thing on earth about a hoss that you don't think you can do," grumbled old Snake, fastening the gate behind them. "You're fixin' to get yourself killed. Pearsall ought to keep you out of the corral."

Hank had passed on to talk to Buster. It was Shorty who jeered the pessimist.

"G'wan, Thompson—whose corral is it? If you don't know, let me introduce you to Miss Van Brunt, owner of the Three Sorrows. Hilda, you just shin up on the fence if you want to see the fun. Buster's going to top him first. Bet a nickel the blue sends him to grass."

The roan was roped, thrown, blinded and saddled, Buster was up at last and with the cry, "Turn loose!" they were off, the horse traveling in a series of bucks straight around the corral. But he attempted no murderous tactics; he was only for shaking off the man on his back; and he moved with such swiftness and beauty of action as is not often seen in a range-bred horse.

"Can't I have him for mine—oh, can't I, Uncle Hank?" Hilda shouted unrestrainably from the top of the fence, where she clung watching.

"Looks like it," chuckled the old man, as the blue

roan finally made his point and sent Buster over his head, then ran snorting in circles. "In about—well, about a year, Pettie, when this feller's had plenty of cutting work and range riding—he'll be fit for a lady's use. Whoa, there—Buck!" as his rope circled the horse's neck. "Let me try him. Now, Pettie, you'll see your Uncle Hank get a fall."

The boys held the roan; Hank eased quickly into the saddle, where he brought to bear a strange skilled gentleness he had with horses which had often calmed even an outlaw, and which saw him safely through this time, though more than once the boys whooped that he was "pulling leather."

Hilda watched enviously, until he dismounted after half an hour's struggle, horse and man dripping with sweat and trembling with exhaustion, but the first stage of Creeping Mose's education fairly completed.

For a lady's use! She would have liked to shout to him that she was not a lady—that she never expected or intended to be one, if it meant that she had to ride only horses that a baby would be safe on. A year, indeed! But she said nothing. She still had that habit of dreaming things—dramatizing what she would have liked to say in her own mind, instead of saying it.

In the old days it would have been The Boy-On-The-Train who tamed Creeping Mose, with a turn of the wrist. But now, all the time she sat on the corral fence watching Uncle Hank handle the wild, courageous thing, she was thinking of Pearse as she'd known him in the days of the cyclone cellar, in that snatched visit on the trail coming back with the Jacox cattle. Pearse was on a ranch. He was the kind to do whatever he did better than those about him did it. As usual, she just put Pearse in Uncle Hank's place on the blue roan's back, had him take rather more risks, and

couldn't keep from clapping her hands when he came through gloriously.

Uncle Hank glanced up, caught her glowing eyes fixed on him, and looked a little startled. She climbed down and walked soberly away. After all, the cyclone cellar was the place to indulge in dreams of Pearse. She was glad now that she'd never shared the secret of her retreat with Burch—or with any one.

It was Sam Kee who helped her carry down the old desk that she put in there, and she even made the Chinaman leave it in the outer cellar, not removing the shielding boxes she kept piled over its door till he was back in the kitchen, tugging the heavy piece of furniture along the narrow passage by herself. Book after book had drifted down from the shelves upstairs to be added to those she kept in a row on the desk top; pictures that took her fancy were tacked up all around; she used to slip away to this retreat at certain times to read a little, write less and dream much. Stolen hours, these, when Burch or Aunt Val or Uncle Hank may have thought she was out for a ride or gone to one of the neighbors.

And these dreams of Pearse, in the dim, brown-walled, dusky, shut-away, little chamber, were about all she had left of him. Not quite, for though he'd never written, as he promised he would, neither had he forgotten her. Every Christmas and every birthday brought some gift to her from him. The first Christmas after the drive there came to her, by the hand of a freighter, a splendid Navajo blanket. Everybody but Uncle Hank wondered over it. The old man asked no questions. He knew it must have come from that one to whom she had lent the Sunday pony, with Charley's bridle and saddle.

When the beautiful thing disappeared from Miss

Val's couch, where it had been spread, and noisy inquiries stirred up the entire household, Uncle Hank again expressed no surprise. Hilda had carried the blanket down to the cyclone cellar. It covered the lounge which had been Pearse's bed. Captain Snow slept on it and filled it with white cat hairs that Hilda carefully brushed off. When the next Christmas brought a quirt and Mexican hackamore of gayly colored and braided horsehair, she refused to put them to sordid use and, after a time, they followed the blanket, hanging on the wall over the lounge. She had a great delight in them. Was not their presence there, their color and beauty, so lovingly, painstakingly wrought, visible evidence that he had not forgotten, any more than she had?

The third year of Jacox's imprisonment saw his release by an indulgent governor. When Tracey came forth a free man, more than four thousand cattle of his brand would trail out of the Three Sorrows pastures—for the herd had prospered greatly. Hank had bought a few cows, here and there, judiciously, where he heard of a bargain; but despite this fact, the departure of the Jacox herd unexpectedly soon would leave the ranch greatly understocked. The manager realized that he would need to find other cattle to take on the shares in order to fill up, and he was glad to receive a proposition from Colonel Lee Marchbanks of Encinal County, New Mexico, who wrote to say that the range out there had failed badly from drouth, and he would like to pasture a herd of probably two thousand of his Flying M stock cattle on the Sorrows, where he knew the grass was unfailing. Sitting in the office, Uncle Hank showed that letter to Hilda; the old man kept to his idea of making her as full a partner in the running of the ranch as a girl of her age could be.

"Seems kind of funny, doesn't it, Uncle Hank," she said, "to think of Marchbanks cattle on our pastures? Do you remember Fayte Marchbanks telling me when we first came here, and I didn't know anything about such things, that this was his ranch?"

The old man nodded, smiling a little, and turned to the letter he was writing, to arrange terms. The herd was brought over by Marchbanks' range boss in October and left at the Sorrows, to remain six months.

They arrived, gaunt and sorry-looking from the long trail and the months of poor grass that had gone before. But to at least one person on the ranch they possessed a secret interest and charm. They had come all the way from Encinal County, in which lies the J I C ranch, where Pearse Masters lived. Why, any one of those sad-faced brindle cows might have seen Pearse himself—in the flesh! In some indefinite way, Pearse seemed nearer to her while the Marchbanks cattle were on the ranch.

Late in the following March, Hank announced, one evening at the supper table, that all hands would be needed next day for rounding up the Flying M's.

Hilda's head was lifted; her glance fixed eagerly on the old man's face.

"Who's coming for them, Uncle Hank?" Burch asked, and saved her the necessity of doing so.

"The Colonel himself, this time," rejoined Hank, taking a letter from his pocket and running over its lines. "He's liable to be here to-morrow or next day; going to camp at *Tres Piños* the last night and get in here fresh to help us work the cattle and road-brand." Hilda had come and leaned over his shoulder to look at the letter. "Even so," he told her, as she rubbed her cheek against the grizzled curls, "it's going to take every hand we've got. You children can both

help." He glanced across to where Burch, close under the lamp, had gone back to his figuring and diagrams. "Son, I'll need even you."

The men were out by daybreak. Hilda was not much behind them. As she hurried down to the corral, after a snatched breakfast, to get her horse, she was trying to picture Colonel Marchbanks to herself; she was carrying on some light, easy conversation with him, in which there always came up a careless question, variously phrased, as to whether or not he knew a young man employed on the J I C ranch by the name of Masters. Buster, the last man out, checked his pony to point to the mail bag, hanging on the corral wall, and shout:

"I brought it in so late last night that I hated to wake you all. Take it up to the house, won't you, Hilda?"

She saddled up swiftly, curbed an impulse to leave the bag till she got back, reached it from its nail, when she was in the saddle, and rode around toward the back to throw it in on the sacred precincts of Sam Kee's porch. Nobody but Hilda dared to do a thing like that.

As she got through the corral gate, she saw Burch half-way out toward the main trail. He turned and yelled at her—a brother's yell—but she had drawn from among the other mail in the bag a letter, addressed in a dashing, clerkly hand, to Miss Hilda Van Brunt, The Three Sorrows, Dawn, Lame Jones County, Texas. In that hand had come addressed all her anonymous gifts. She neither heard nor saw anything about her.

Burch whooped long and derisively, while she sat her pony and read, over and over, the brief letter the envelope contained:

Dear Hilda,

I wonder if this will get to Lame Jones County before I do. Hope it will, for I'm certainly not going to ride up to the Three Sorrows and call, and I do want to see you. I'm making a quick trip through for my company, and I think I'll be somewhere in your neighborhood about March 28th. That sounds pretty uncertain to you, maybe, but if you should happen to be on the main trail any time that day—why, then you'd happen to see

Your friend,

Pearse Masters.

March twenty-eighth! That was to-day! What luck, that they were going to work Flying M cattle in the small pasture lying beside the Ojo Bravo trail! That was what Pearse must mean. She sent one last shout after the departing Burch, rode her pony along the garden walk and deftly shot the mail bag in, while Sam Kee grumbled at her, then loped off to join the working force. Had the small pasture not commanded the Ojo Bravo trail, Uncle Hank would have lacked her help that day—in which case, many things might have been different.

As it was, her eyes, continually turned to the westward way, were first to see a light outfit coming in on the lower trail. She waved and shouted to Uncle Hank to call his attention. There were only six riders and a chuck wagon. Hank joined brother and sister at the fence and studied the newcomers in the distance with some surprise. The work of getting ready was well under way. All the Marchbanks cattle were in one enclosure. It was barely ten o'clock, yet the sun was beginning to be unpleasantly warm, and Hank pushed back his hat to rub his forehead dubiously and say:

“If there was anybody else for that to be, I'd say it

wasn't them. They're flyin' mighty light and goin' might fast for an outfit that expects to pick up two-thousand-and-some cows."

On they came, the riders at a thundering gallop, the chuck wagon bumping behind. There was something dashing, arresting, inconsequent about their approach. Hank rode slowly down the fence line, Hilda and Burch after him, and greeted the men half doubtfully.

The leader raised a hand in salute. Here was the father of Maybelle and Fayte. Here was that Lee Marchbanks, the Virginian whom Guadalupe Romero had run away to marry. Somehow he was disappointing to Hilda. Dressed about as any cattleman would be, well mounted, and unusually well armed, he was still very different from the mental picture she had of him. In this open-range country it was customary for an outfit to carry weapons, yet the rifle swung under every rider's right leg, the handle of the bowie knife protruding here and there from a casual boot-leg, in addition to the familiar pair of six-shooters at each belt, made the group look positively warlike. Naturally Hilda's attention centered most on a young fellow, slim, dark, but with odd, long, slate-gray eyes, who rode next to the leader and regarded everybody about him with an air of authority and a little half smile that lifted a small dark mustache.

"I reckon them are my cattle," said the leader, abruptly, and without a greeting. "I've come for 'em."

"Colonel Marchbanks?" Hank spoke with his usual politeness. The man across the barbed-wire fence shot him a quick glance of surprise—or was it suspicion? Then, with a bare nod, repeated:

"We've come for the cattle."

"I see," said Hank.

The others sat their ponies, alert, looking about them as men who have never been in a country before may do. Hilda saw the young fellow nearest to the Colonel say something to him in a low tone, and Marchbanks spoke again, on a somewhat different note:

"Sorry to hurry you, Pearsall. We're taking the cattle right out."

"What!" ejaculated Hank, startled into the mild indiscretion of questioning. "This afternoon? Turn right around and take the trail without waiting to rest?"

The colonel reddened angrily.

"The *cattle's* fresh, ain't they?" he snapped. "*They* don't need to rest. I aim to take 'em out—and that as damned quick as I can get 'em out!"

Speech and manner were sufficiently surprising. Hilda looked anxiously at Uncle Hank. But the manager had caught his breath now. His steady eyes studied the outfit unhurriedly. The horses were good, they and the men well accoutered. But the letter in Hank's pocket mentioned things that couldn't be done and get the cattle out in one day.

"Well," he allowed, "I don't know but by pressing all hands in to help, we might get 'em out and worked and tallied over for ye. But what about the road-branding?"

The colonel shook his head. It might have meant anything. The slim dark young fellow who held Hilda's rather unwilling attention, and got her grudging admiration, in spite of lingering doubts, turned and spoke to the four others in so low a tone that Hilda thought Uncle Hank could hardly hear him. What he said was:

"We'll go through here, boys—cut the fence. Gid, you've got the nippers—cut here."

Gid was instantly off his horse and at work.

The angry blood flew to Hilda's face.

"Hold on!" cried Pearsall. "Hold on! There's a gate up yonder a piece. It won't take you fifteen minutes longer, I—" He hesitated to characterize so wanton an outrage. "Don't cut my fence."

The wires had already sprung, jangling and quivering, to the ground.

"The boys'll mend it. I'll pay you," Marchbanks said briefly, putting his horse through the gap. "Come on."

The seven men rode to the herd, from whose edges Burch and the Three S cowboys were watching the maneuvers of the newcomers.

"Get to work, men," said Marchbanks, and the cutting out of calves was soon in full swing.

Hilda and her brother were set to hold the "cut." Burch wasn't skillful, but Hilda made up for it. She could keep her eye on the cattle and still have plenty of attention to give to the young man she thought was Fayte Marchbanks, riding close to his father, acting as though he really directed every move the colonel made. If it was Fayte, he paid no attention whatever to her; didn't seem to remember her at all. When he did lift a glance her way, she had a queer little thrill, not entirely pleasant, at the flashing out of his odd, slate-gray eyes under the black brows; eyes whose reckless light matched the bravo slant of his sombrero and went well with the general air of the heavily armed Marchbanks party. She had half a mind to leave Burch holding the cut a moment while she rode over and said "Hello" to him and asked about Maybelle. There was even a daring thought that she'd inquire of

him, instead of his father, if he'd met Pearse Masters over in New Mexico. She did start to do it, but Uncle Hank waved her back. Then she noticed how funny Uncle Hank was acting—so heavy and slow-witted.

"Careful about cutting out them calves," he cautioned his men, again and again. "I don't want to rob the owner, nor have the owner rob the Sorrows. We're all young. Ain't such an awful haste."

"The hell they ain't!" broke out Marchbanks, in whose hearing this was said. "Who told you?"

There was an instant of dubious silence. Old Snake bristled for all the world like a faithful dog who suspects that his master is affronted. Shorty sat up suddenly in the saddle, his blue eyes fairly blazing in his brick-red face. Then Pearsall spoke, with mild civility:

"Didn't camp at *Tres Piños*—did you?"

Marchbanks, hustling an unruly calf toward the cut, ejaculated:

"At *Tres Piños*—no! Who said I was camping there?"

Pearsall pulled up his buckskin pony and let a cow get past him unnoticed. The Flying M man's active young lieutenant yelled a protest in vain. Hilda edged in toward Uncle Hank. She had read that letter, too; yet it was characteristic of the western cattle country—of which she was growing to be a well-seasoned citizen—that not a word, not a glance, passed between them. They both knew that this *might* be Marchbanks, and his behavior merely a matter of temperament or eccentricity; but he might be a rustler. Such high-handed robbery was not unknown. She knew that there was more than fifty thousand dollars' worth of stock concerned. The outsiders were seven, all suspiciously well armed. Presently Uncle Hank drifted himself

to her side, dismounted and, under pretext of tightening her cinch, spoke to her:

"Listen sharp, Pettie. Mind, I ain't sure—you never can tell—there ain't one of us here, as it chances, that's ever seen Lee Marchbanks. You heard these fellers over there at the fence. What I'm thinking is that if Shorty, or me, or Thompson—or even Burch—was to try to leave this pasture, we'd have war on our hands. But you can go, I reckon. You can make it this-away: talk around free about being hungry, and ask me to let you go up to the house and get your dinner. Then, the minute you're out of sight, you put spurs to that pony and ride all you know, straight for *Tres Piños*. If there's nobody there, come back easy, for I reckon it'll be all right. If you find the Flying M outfit camped at the spring, fetch 'em on the jump, honey." He raised his voice. "There, I reckon that'll hold—but it needs mending with a new one."

They sheered apart. Hilda whirled her pony to help Marchbanks with a calf he was heading.

"Thank you, little lady," he said, with an admiring glance for her horsemanship and skill. "You're the girl for my money."

"I could work better if I wasn't so hungry," laughed Hilda. "Oh, Uncle Hank," as Pearsall came past, "can't I, please, go up to the house and get something to eat? I'm starving."

"Aw—you're shirking, Hilda!" cried Burch, overhearing. "No fair! Uncle Hank, make her stay, and we'll all go up together."

This accidental detail made Hilda's exit very plausible. Marchbanks himself, pleased by the girl's apparent liking, put in:

"This work's not fit for young ladies, anyhow. Let Miss Hilda go."

Hilda wheeled her pony and gave him the spur. "I'll bring you all some of Sam Kee's pi-i-ie!" she called back, as she galloped away toward the gate.

Through all the excitement of the morning, she had not failed to keep an eye on the western trail. Suppose Pearse should be coming along now—just as she crossed it! Her nerves tautened to the thought.

Back at the herd, Uncle Hank, a most patient and skillful handler of cattle, began to make a series of strange blunders. Twice he nearly stampeded the Marchbanks cut. Once he put his pony so squarely across the colonel's path that it was only by fine horsemanship that that gentleman missed a bad fall.

"For God's sake, old man!" he snarled. "Get in the house and tend to your knitting, and let us work these cows. You needn't be afraid I won't leave you your share. If you stay out here and make many more passes like that, we'll have men to bury."

"I was thinking about something else." Pearsall seemed to overlook the rebuke. "I ain't generally so awkward. Maybe I'd better go down and mend fence."

"Not till we've put our cattle through that gap!" cried Marchbanks.

"Oh—all right, all right," agreed the manager.

Meanwhile, Hilda was pushing Sunday toward the house at his top speed—which wasn't very much—Sunday had been faster when he was three years younger. As she went, there thrilled through her exultantly the thought of Creeping Mose in the home corral. His breaking had been interrupted for the gathering of the Flying M cattle. She shut her lips tight together, and gave Sunday the spur. She remembered Buster's first proud introduction of the blue roan to her attention:

“Run! He can run like a scared wolf.”

Having crossed the trail and got no sight of a solitary rider whom she could identify as Pearse, Hilda was desperate. She must not refuse to ride to *Tres Piños* to save the Marchbanks cattle; but Sunday would be all the rest of the day making such a trip. Pearse would pass by while she was gone. Creeping Mose was the only thing on the place that could get her there and back in time to have a chance of meeting Pearse. Again she spurred Sunday, and he went past the porch, where Miss Valeria dozed over a novel, with such a burst of speed that the lady waked up, looked after her niece, somewhat aggrieved, and called a remonstrance, settling down to a murmured: “Getting too big a girl for these hoyden tricks. I ought to speak to Mr. Pearsall. The man encourages her.”

Hilda took a short cut through the kitchen garden, where Sam Kee, cutting delectable heads of lettuce from their stalks, rose in wrath as the pony's hoofs plunged into the soft, brown, irrigated soil.

“You spoil 'um!” he squealed. “Unc' Hank—he spoil 'um you.”

For only answer the girl glanced back over her shoulder to where, in his faded denim, he hopped about like an infuriated and oversized bluejay, his squawks inevitably suggesting the comparison, and called: “Come on—come on, Sam. Help me.”

“No help!” the Chinaman ejaculated, toddling after her. When he reached the corral and found her with the saddle off the sweating Sunday, her rope swinging, saw it settle over Creeping Mose and bring him up short, Sam stopped in the tall, door-like gateway and burst out in a splutter of dismay:

“You let 'um blue horse 'lone. Blue horse debbil. Unc' Hankie say let 'um 'lone.”

Hilda had got the bridle on Mose.

"Come here and hold him for me," she cried. "Come on—quick, Sam. He won't try to stamp you—he never does. He'll be all right when I'm up on him. Hurry. He'll only buck and run."

The Chinaman came. He took the reins in practiced yellow fingers.

"You die an' be kill," he said.

Up went the saddle, but the pony dodged it, lowering himself and flinching away just at the right instant. Again this maneuver was repeated, Hilda, panting, desperate over the loss of time.

"Take your apron off and flap it in his face. Go on, Sam Kee—flap your apron," she commanded chokingly.

Protesting, refusing, "No! No take off ape'!" Sam Kee obeyed. Once more, Hilda swung the saddle; this time it landed. Almost in the instant of jerking tight the last cinch-strap, she was up.

Creeping Mose hung a moment, as in surprise, then humped his back for the first plunge. She whirled her heavy quirt and brought it down with all her might. Mose, with lowered head stuck out straight, shot through the gate in a series of long leaps.

Sam Kee sat down, legs rigid before him, black eyes blinking, listening to the thunder of the hoofs as Creeping Mose ran like a streak out along the *Tres Piños* trail.

CHAPTER XX

HILDA AND THE BLUE ROAN

THE first four miles were covered at terrific speed, though three times Creeping Mose stopped with a plunge and declared his intention of fighting it out then and there. But Hilda was aflame. Fear was wiped out. Between the level plain and burning sky, she knew only Creeping Mose and herself—herself with neither flesh nor bones, nor anything but a blind determination to force him to her will.

She clung like a limpet. When the horse bucked most fiercely, she swung the quirt and let him have it with all the strength of her arm. Her black hair was shaken out of its plait and blew behind her, a waving banner; her face was crimson with the heat and exertion. On heaving chest and shoulders the shirt-waist clung, soaked. At every jump sweat flew from the horse and splattered on the dry, hot earth. At last Mose flung himself obliquely into the air in a whirling buck. She set her teeth for what she'd seen the boys do, and brought the head of her quirt down in a thump between his ears. She hated to do that, but it seemed to be what Mose needed; with a snort, he gathered himself; then, as though he decided that what he had on his back was boss of the expedition, stretched out his neck and broke away in a dead run that was a revelation to Hilda of horse speed.

No captive of old Rome ever drove his chariot race

down the great hippodrome in a finer ecstasy of rashness than that which thrilled through Hilda as the long levels streamed back beneath those flying hoofs. This wasn't the Hilda of the cyclone cellar who needed to dress up and make believe for her romance.

Her whole thought had been to rush the thing through and get back to the trail where it cut the road to El Capitan, where she would meet Pearse; but this—this was real daring and adventure. It was the sort of thing any one of the boys would have done, taking it all as a part of the day's work. She, too, let her whole self go in the action, like one of them, like a soldier on a battlefield. She'd taken Creeping Mose against Uncle Hank's orders. But she knew the rules of the range: if she made good—and she would—she was all right. At the end of four breathless, flashing miles, the horse was still running strongly.

Four miles and a half; he was coming down to a steady, swinging lope. Five miles; the fierce sun stung her bare head and face, the wind roared in her ears, continuous, browbeating, and her horse was almost at the end of wind and strength.

As the blue roan ceased to fight her, Hilda's thoughts had a chance to clear a bit, she had breath and attention to admire him. She leaned forward and patted him on the neck—and the sweat fumed up around her hand like suds. A year—Uncle Hank had thought he might be fit for her in a year—and here she was riding him within three days!

What was happening back there on the Three Sorrows? That outfit were rustlers. Uncle Hank thought so, or he'd never have sent her on such an errand as this. She couldn't get away from the belief that the young fellow with them was Fayte Marchbanks. And the cattle belonged to Fayte's father. Well—that

didn't make any difference—they were rustlers just the same.

Nobody but a rustler would have been as careless as that man was about the count. People didn't feel that way about their own cattle. That look in his eye, when he praised her and called her "little lady"—she wasn't exactly sure where and how it offended her so much, yet she knew that it did offend. Rustler! That's what he was.

Far off on that open plain the three pines that stood above the spring began to show like tiny weeds. With her breath coming in gasps, scarce able to feel the saddle beneath her or the rein she clutched in her hands, she yet brought her heels sharply against Mose's dripping sides, and he answered with a spurt. Taller and taller the pines loomed; finally, she could make out beneath them a hooded chuck-wagon, hobbled ponies, and men lying or sitting about.

No need of the quirt now; Creeping Mose obeyed her hand or voice humbly. As she used both to encourage him, he gave a sort of convulsive cat-hop and, shaking his head, plunged forward at a jolting, uneven run, which, exhausted, as she was, came near to unseating her. She could hardly see the camp as she swept in to it, hardly hear the shouts of the men, who jumped up and ran toward her, one of them catching the bit, bringing the horse to a standstill, another lifting her down as she rolled from the saddle.

She heard some one call: "Colonel Marchbanks—come here!" And then another voice, saying:

"Whoa, Buck!"

"Hold up, sister! Steady, steady, young lady! Had a runaway?"

"Whoa, Buck—whoa!" roared the cowpuncher who had seized Creeping Mose, revolving with him, kick-

ing up a great dust. "You old fool—don't you know when you're done?" Abruptly the horse halted, he dropped at once into exhaustion, a sweat-soaked miserable spectacle. The man who held Hilda called over his shoulder:

"Tarpy, fetch a pan of water, quick!" and when the squat little cook hurried up with the basin, he dipped his handkerchief in it and laved Hilda's face and hands. "Plucky young 'un," he said softly to Tarpy. "She isn't going to faint. Hey, you boys—Slim and Charley! Pull that bedding roll over here."

In those first moments, as Hilda lay there in a sort of daze, she entirely forgot the errand that had brought her out here in such a fury of eagerness. All she could see was Pearse, going past the Sorrows gate—missing her. Oh—why had she come? Somebody was lifting her into a more comfortable position against the bedding roll. The big man drew the dripping handkerchief again and again across her face; then dipped hands and wrists into the basin itself.

"You're all right now," he repeated. "You're not hurt."

Her eyes opened in a quick look about her and fixed upon his face.

"Colonel Marchbanks?"

"Yes, that's my name," he said. "Were you looking for me? What's the matter?"

Hilda's gasping had moderated. She drew in as much breath as she was able and spoke clearly:

"An outfit came in this morning after your cattle—"

"What outfit?"

"I don't know. They came in this morning. They cut our fence and made Uncle Hank begin work right away."

Marchbanks bent forward sharply, Tarpy, the cook,

beside him. The two boys who had brought the bedding roll leaned frankly over the others' shoulders.

"Uncle Hank—they didn't act right—he sent me here. We thought, when they wouldn't road-brand—"

"You're a good girl," said the colonel; "I'll thank you later."

Then he stood up, ordering:

"Get the hobbles off the best horses. Every man saddle his own. All come with me but Tarpy and Slim. Tarpy," he spoke in a lower tone to the cook, "you stay with the little girl. If she gets able to go back home and wants to [Hilda tried to say, "I do," but no sound came], have Slim put her saddle on my sorrel, and ride over, easy, with her." Then he turned to question her again:

"How big an outfit is it? What do they look like?"

Hilda answered in little, broken sentences:

"Six of them—and a chuck-wagon. But they had so many guns. He's very young—almost a boy."

The colonel was buckling his cartridge belt; he whirled and looked at her, demanding:

"Which one is that you're speaking of?"

"The one that rode right beside the man that called himself Colonel Marchbanks. He looked like— We all took him for—"

The real Colonel Marchbanks glanced to where his men were getting on their ponies. He waved to them to ride on, and they whirled away in a cloud of dust. Then, bracing hands on knees, he bent down and prompted:

"You took him for—?"

"Your son."

The colonel straightened up without a word, ran to his pony, flung himself upon it, and was off after the others.

She rested, with closed eyes, glad to be let alone. Presently she heard Slim's voice, in guarded tones:

"Ye took notice what the little girl said. That's Fayte, all right."

There was silence for a few minutes, then Slim spoke again:

"Sort of sorry for the colonel."

"Yeah," assented Tarpy. "G'wan an' round up them horses, Slim, and have 'em all saddled an' ready time she's had this coffee. She's game; you'll git over, mebbe, in time to git a look-in at the festivities—or the funeral—after all."

Slim hesitated, looking doubtfully at Hilda. She sat up as Tarpy came toward her with a steaming tin cup, declared herself all right and, to prove it, drank the strong coffee. Tarpy stood looking, and then stated, respectfully:

"Slim'll be ready, Miss, whenever you want to ride over. That sorrel of the colonel's is as easy as a rocking chair."

"Mebbe we hadn't ought to hurry the young lady," Slim put in, wistfully. "She's had an awful trip, an'—"

"Oh, no, no!" cried Hilda, gathering up her hair, beginning to braid it with hands that shook. "I must go—I've got to!"

"Sure, I know how you feel, ma'am," sympathized Tarpy. "Fetch up the sorrel, Slim."

Slim responded promptly this time. Hilda turned again to look where Creeping Mose stood motionless, his feet braced wide, his head hanging, the streaming sweat drying on his blue-gray coat in rough cakes. She got to her feet and stumbled over to him. She laid a hand on his neck—there was no snorting and tossing up of his head now. Creeping Mose never even

flinched—he had all he could do to just stand on those four wide-braced feet. Hilda choked a little.

“I feel the same way myself, Mose,” she muttered, a bit thickly, in his drooping ear. “I ache all over, too. If I licked you, you certainly hammered me. I wouldn’t have done it—if I hadn’t just had to.”

“He’ll be all right in the morning, ma’am,” Slim assured her. “Tarp’y’ll take good care of him, and they’ll lead him in with the outfit when it follers us. Here’s the sorrel for you.”

Hilda crawled wincingly into the saddle, with his help. At first every movement of the easy-gaited creature she rode was pain to her, and Slim watched anxiously. But soon she swung into the motion and her bruised, wearied body was forgotten in that fierce eagerness to “get there.” Slim, on a wiry, glass-eyed mustang, set the pace, and a stiff one it grew to be. There were scarcely two dozen words spoken as they put the miles behind them; both leaned forward eagerly in their saddles, Slim’s eyes always straight ahead, Hilda’s continually sweeping the levels about them. Long before they covered the distance, they saw a vast cloud of dust hanging on the horizon.

“Stand it any faster?” Slim inquired.

Hilda nodded, and they spurred up. The big dust cloud grew bigger and more palpable.

“Looks like they’s a-havin’ a kind of a time,” commented Slim. “We mebbe could get a finger in the pie yet, if we shove ahead.” The glass-eyed mustang shot forward, Hilda and the sorrel hanging close at its quarter.

“Oh, look!” said Hilda. A flurry of dust approached them, out of which emerged several head of Flying M cattle, running staggeringly. Two or three

showed long, bloody scratches on head and breast or shoulders.

“Bust through the bob-wire!” Slim rose in his stirrups and swung his quirt, whooping shrilly. He and Hilda, between them, turned the animals and headed them back. Presently they met two more small bunches, which they turned in like manner and took with them. When they got within sight of the pasture where the Flying M stock had been worked that morning, they saw that the herd was in a pretty well-established mill, the main bulk of the cattle sweeping in a great, brown, living, sweating circle. An occasional Three S man, or one of the Flying M hands, came galloping around on the edge of the surge. As Slim and Hilda rode gingerly across the prostrate fence, they heard a shot fired off to the right, toward the Ojo Bravo trail; another, then three in quick succession. Slim stopped like a pointer dog and threw his nose up, sighting in that direction.

“Well, the colonel got there in time, that’s sure,” was his comment.

Just then Burch came in sight, loping with the swing of the cattle.

“Hello, Hilda!” he cried. “You made it all right.”

They put their horses in alongside him and moved with him while he told them, in a few quick sentences:

“Uncle Hank stampeded the cattle—only thing he could do—shook a blanket. We weren’t fixed to open fight—not a gun amongst us—they all armed. The cattle commenced to run, and everybody flew in to turn ’em and mill ’em. While we were at it, Uncle Hank rode up to me and hollered that the Flying M men were coming—and there was Marchbanks and the whole outfit. The rustlers cut and run for it.”

“What shooting was that we just heard, d’you reckon?”

“The colonel and two of his men went after the rustlers—out yonder. They must have overhauled ’em.”

Burch rode on with the milling cattle, while Slim and Hilda pulled out. Presently Uncle Hank came to her and told her to go to the house and rest.

“Oh, I couldn’t, Uncle Hank!” she declared. “Let me stay.”

CHAPTER XXI

ANOTHER CHANCE

AS the afternoon wore on, Hilda, helping to gather strays, watching always the westward trail for Pearse, began to lose hope. The colonel had not come back from his chase of the rustlers, but his men were here; again Uncle Hank came to her to say that they were full-handed now—no need for her to half kill herself; she'd better get to the house, wash up and have something to eat.

With her eyes on the way down which Pearse might have come, she said, in a discouraged tone:

“I'll go out just this once more; then I will give it up and ride to the house; I suppose my face does need washing. I don't feel as if I could eat any supper. But I'll be glad to get to bed to-night.”

She rode alone, and very slowly. The whole broad plain was beginning to glow with sunset. But Hilda had no eyes for the glories of the sky; all she could see was the empty trail that stretched toward the golden rim in the west. Pearse hadn't come—or she'd missed him. Back of her, as she halted, was a break of the creek—a deep, shadowy place of willows and wild plum. Well—she'd go down there and wash her face—she knew from the way Uncle Hank had looked at her that washing was badly needed. But when she turned her pony she saw that some one else was there; a horse was drinking at the creek; its rider looked sharply around as she came down the slope.

It was very dusky in the hollow. For a moment she wondered if she hadn't stumbled onto one of the rustlers, or even overhauled Colonel Marchbanks, who had gone after them. Then the man pulled up his pony's head, wheeled it and came toward her. She was in full light, he in shadow; she could only see that he was a big, broad-shouldered fellow, fair-haired, in the ordinary cow-boy dress, and she believed him to be some one she had never seen before until he came close, lifting his hat, with:

"Why, it *is* Hilda—and I believe you don't know me!"

"Oh, Pearse!" In the first shock of delight, the relief from the long sense of disappointment, Hilda forgot her flying hair, her dust-streaked face. "Oh, Pearse—oh, Pearse!"

He put his pony in close enough to shake hands, smiling at her a little oddly. And, all at once, she was shy of him, after all. He looked so terribly grown up. No, he wasn't her Boy-On-The-Train any more. It made her catch her breath to remember the five days in the cyclone cellar, when he'd played games with her, and even taken a sort of hand at being a princely fugitive while she was a princess. This tall, dignified young man was different, too, from the big boy with the grouch who brought the Sunday pony back to her that time on the trail coming from El Capitan.

"How did you get here without my seeing you?" she asked, a little breathlessly. "I was watching—right where you said—as well as I could. We've had a stampede, and—well, I guess you might call it rustlers—the Marchbanks cattle that we were pasturing on the Sorrows."

"Yes. I know." Pearse gave her another of those queer looks. But he let it go at that and finished: "I

circled around the short-cut to get here. Didn't want to be seen."

"Who—who didn't you want to see you, Pearse?" Hilda asked humbly. "Uncle Hank?"

He shook his head.

"Not that I'd mind going over to the ranch and speaking to him to-day. I'm in no trouble. I'd not be asking anything of him. It's Marchbanks that I don't want to see me this time, or know I'm in Lame Jones County."

"Oh," said Hilda. Then, "Listen, Pearse. Pull back in here, if you mean to keep out of sight."

Hoof-beats coming from two directions on the trail. Hilda and Pearse, drawn close in the shelter of the willows, saw the big gray pony that Colonel Marchbanks rode splash through the creek. Just on the further side he stopped. The other rider came on. As Hilda peered through the screening branches, she saw the young fellow that she'd been sure was Fayette Marchbanks pull up and meet the rider of the gray pony.

"Fayette!" she heard the colonel call. The young man jerked off his hat in a sarcastic bow and answered, hardily:

"It's nobody else, Dad."

"Where do you think you're going?" the colonel snarled. "Turn that pony and ride after the men you were helping to rob me. Go with them. You can't stay here."

"You're mistaken there." Fayette spoke confidently, but there was fear in the glance that flickered to his father's face. "I was with those men, all right. But we didn't get the cattle. I'm staying with what's mine."

"Yours?" The colonel's tone was loud, furious.

"You haven't got a cent but what I give you. You—"

"Just so." Fayte had out his tobacco and was rolling a cigarette. Hilda saw how the fingers shook, but his eyes were impudent. "That's the way you look at it. You treat me like a child. I'm not standing for it. A man of my age has debts that he doesn't care to go to his daddy with. If you'd give me what belongs to me—I wouldn't try to take it."

"You've got a big idea of what belongs to you," the colonel growled. "Get out of my sight. What do you suppose Pearsall and the others are saying, back there?"

"Quién sabe?" Fayte shrugged, but he threw away the cigarette he had not even attempted to light. "Hadn't we better ride back together—show 'em it's all right?"

He still spoke confidently, and started his pony forward with a swing, but the watchers both recognized his relief as the colonel, after a little hesitation, wheeled his heavier mount into the trail after him. They went off quarreling—but they went together.

Hilda and Pearse sat on their ponies, hidden, where they were, till the sound of hoofs died away, then rode out. Pearse glanced about, and said, uncomfortably:

"We won't have much time together, Hilda; I've got to be on my way. But I'll ride along with you in the direction of the house. You need to get home."

Slowly they took a little cross-cut Hilda knew of. Pearse spoke again, frowning:

"I'd rather not have seen or heard that, myself. You see, Hilda, the colonel's a member of the Cattle-men's Protective Association; my company's in it, too, of course, and I'm here representing them. We've run up against crooked stuff that Fayte Marchbanks was connected with before, and we always have to back

away from it, because of the colonel. Anyhow I'll make my report; and they won't move because it concerns the colonel's own cattle, and he'll have to settle it as a family affair."

"You—you said when I saw you on the trail, that time you brought Sunday back, that you knew Maybelle Marchbanks." Hilda was, unconsciously, trying to bring some more personal interest into the talk. "I used to know her over here in Lame Jones County."

"Yes."

"Do you like her?"

"Oh," negligently, "I hardly know her enough to say. There's mighty little doing between our ranch and the Marchbanks place."

"Is she very pretty?" Hilda asked the girl's question, and reddened as Pearse answered, with a smile:

"You can tell whether she's pretty or not by Fayette's looks—they're a good deal alike."

Hilda thought Maybelle might be very good-looking, indeed, but some instinct kept her from saying so.

"Are there other young folks over where you're living now?" She put it rather wistfully.

"Yes, plenty of them," returned Pearse, and somehow Hilda felt chilled.

"Who?"

"Oh, most of the ranches have young folks on them. Our manager has a niece visiting him just now, from Galveston. She plays the piano beautifully."

Hilda—tired, bedraggled, a truant at the music lessons—suddenly hated that girl from Galveston—and was ashamed of herself for the hatred—and couldn't be content till she had more details for that hatred to feed on.

"Is she pretty?"

"Our manager's niece? Yes. Very."

"Does she know Fayte Marchbanks?"

"Why, yes—I suppose she does."

"Does she like him?"

"Why, Hilda—what possesses my little pal? Miss Esmond is a young lady—you understand—a grown young lady. Fayte Marchbanks has called on her once or twice since she's been at the ranch. I think she knew him in Galveston. He speaks good Spanish, she's traveled a whole lot in Old Mexico and likes to talk to some one who speaks the language well. That's all there is to it. Most of the nice girls out our way— young ladies, I mean, of course—keep Fayte Marchbanks at a distance, I think."

They all knew each other; they spoke languages fluently; they had unforbidden companionship with Pearse, and he with them. She was an exile from it all.

"I never get to go anywhere or see anybody," said Hilda, gathering up her reins as though to start her pony ahead faster. "I haven't got any friends of my own age."

"You haven't?" groped Pearse, taken aback—"I thought you told me about youngsters on the Capadine ranch that you played with."

There was a moment's uncomfortable silence after that "youngsters," a silence in which Hilda was conscious mostly of a tired, aching body and smarting cheeks. Then she spoke again, in a small choked voice:

"I must be getting home."

"I'll ride as far as I dare with you," said Pearse, alert, concerned, but all in the dark. "I wish we could have had more of a visit together."

"Oh!" Hilda turned on him tear-blinded, angry eyes, "you needn't bother to come any further. I can

just play with youngsters, I suppose!" She lifted the rein and was off at a gallop, and she never looked back to see how he took that blow.

She didn't look back. She wouldn't look back. But, after the first, she went very slowly. Any one who'd wanted to could have overtaken her in a minute. Almost walking her pony that way made her late. Supper was over. She went in, head down, moving with dragging steps. She felt beaten and bruised; sunburned till she was almost in a fever. To these things she was more or less accustomed; a night of sound sleep would put them right; but the wounds of that interview with Pearse were new and terrifying; the sting of chagrin that it had left upon the face of her spirit was intolerable. That parting cut she had aimed at him was, by some cruel magic, cleaving her own heart now. It ached and bled. How could she ever bear it?

She washed up, stumbled into Sam Kee's kitchen and sat down at his little table to eat the supper he had saved for her. The old Chinaman turned from the stove, where he was stirring something, intending to give her one of his grumbling scoldings. When he saw how worsted she looked, how she sipped at her coffee and ate almost nothing, he went instead and fetched a little dish of lemon jelly from the pantry, saying, more in sympathy than reproach:

"Sam Kee tell you blue horse debbil. Tell you he kill you."

"I had to ride him," murmured Hilda absently.

Oh, it hurt dreadfully to be angry at Pearse—to feel bitter toward him. If she had a chance to talk with him now—only for a minute—only a minute—she would put her pride in her pocket and make it all right at any cost.

She shoved the lemon jelly away; then, catching Sam

Kee's crestfallen look, drew it back and ate a little of it.

"That's all, Sam," she said, trying to smile. "Can't eat any more now. Too tired. Go to bed now."

But as she was on her way to the stair's foot, Hank's voice called to her from the office:

"Come in here a minute, Pettie—I've got something to tell you that won't keep till morning."

She went in and sat down on the low stool near his chair, leaning over against his arm. Every line of her slim figure drooped; the arms hung listlessly at her sides.

"Pettie!" he said, in quick alarm. "Anything the matter, honey?"

"Oh, I stayed out too long. I'm perfectly dog tired. That's all."

"Umm-humm," agreed the old man gently, "I should think you would be. When I went to the corral this evening I seen what horse it was you rode to *Tres Piños*."

Eyes down, Hilda waited for the reproof. She was at that dead ebb, physical, mental, emotional, that could expect nothing but blame, defeat.

"Mose was the only one that could get there," she said, lifelessly, offering it as a statement, not a defense.

"Why, I'm not mad at you about it, honey." The old man's voice was soft. "I'm proud of you. You asked for the horse in the first place—he's your'n now."

A little tingle of delight stirred the flat level of Hilda's depression.

"You said he wouldn't be fit for a lady for three years," she began, and then broke off—"but then I'm not a lady. I suppose I'm just one of the youngsters."

I can't play decently on the piano, or—speak good Spanish—or any of those things. Maybe I never will.”

Uncle Hank looked at her in blank amazement. When he spoke there was sort of a reluctance in his voice.

“The—er—what I wanted to say to you just now has got something to do with that—”

She looked up at him, a little startled.

“—That matter of education, I mean. Colonel Marchbanks rode in pretty soon after you left the pasture. Brought that boy of his with him; made some kind of a talk about Fayte having been mistaken in the day he wanted them cows moved, but that he'd give the boy orders to meet him here and to help him and—well, Pettie, what is a man to say? Best we can do is to forget that we had any suspicions. He's gone on now to Amarillo—to be back here in about a week.”

“Yes?”

Hilda had dropped her head once more; she did not raise it now. After a short pause, in which Hank regarded anxiously the bit of her face which he could see, he went on:

“The colonel's taken a great liking to you, Pettie. He praised you high.”

This was Uncle Hank's medicine for her depression. She managed a smile. But he was not done. The tone in which he proceeded suggested careful restraint. He did not look at her.

“Marchbanks has asked for you to go and stay at his ranch for a year—or as much longer as we're willing to have you—and study under a good teacher with his daughter, Maybelle. Course, I wasn't making any such arrangements as that; but I talked it over with

him—on a business basis, you know. We settled what your board would be and what our share of the teacher's pay ought to come to—if you went."

Every line in Hilda's figure had begun to change. She fetched a long breath. The dusty feet were drawn back under her; slowly the drooping shoulders straightened; her head lifted; in the eyes that sought the old man's face light was growing.

"Oh," she breathed—"oh, Uncle Hank!"

Hank had expected at least some reluctance on his girl's part to leave the ranch. She'd had solid schooling, gone flying through the grammar grades, was well grounded in all the essentials now. To every proposition for further education she'd always said that she expected to be a ranchwoman, and, beyond what she had already, reading would have to take the place of schooling. But now, as he studied the tremulous face, he saw there would be a different answer, and he said quietly:

"That teacher's a college graduate—the best to be had. She could get you ready for any college in the country, I reckon."

Hilda lowered her eyes hastily.

"I—I liked Maybelle," she said, speaking very low. "Isn't it—a pretty name—Uncle Hank?"

"Right nice," agreed Hank, suppressing a twinge—his girl, like any other girl, was looking for young companionship; that's what made her eager for the New Mexico trip, and change.

Hilda, her eyes held defensively down, was flying back in thought to that unspoken prayer of hers for another minute—only a minute—another chance to pocket her pride and make it all right with Pearse. Hank watched her, puzzled.

“Er—you’re pleased, ain’t you, honey? You want to go—don’t you?”

Hilda started, and the look flashed up at him was almost like terror.

“Oh, yes!” she cried. “Why—doesn’t it come in splendidly? Aren’t you glad?”

“Well,” said the old man mildly, “seeing that it makes you that-a-way, I reckon I am. You see,” he took the slim hands that came out anxiously toward him, “you see, when the colonel first named it to me, I felt sort of doubtful, but now I know. You’ve showed me.”

CHAPTER XXII

YOUNG WINGS

THERE was no going to bed for Hilda now. Once out of Uncle Hank's sight, she turned and ran noiselessly through the dim, empty, clean-smelling kitchen to the cyclone cellar, lighted her candle and began, with feverish eagerness, a letter to Pearse. She was tingling with a joy that had to express itself; all thought of her unsatisfactory talk with Pearse was swept away or changed. He'd be as glad of this chance to see her, where they could openly be friends, as she was.

Out over the page bubbled her child's heart, which was scarcely yet the young girl's heart, accusing herself—"I was horrid"—"I know you'll forgive me"—"just cross and tired"—"and hate to have to meet you on the sly." She was almost drowned in the wonderfulness of the thought that at last they were to be together without deceit and without fear. The delight of it singing in her veins, she wrote with impulsive confidence. "Won't it be lovely not to have to hide or tell any fibs, and to have our visit out at last? I have so many books I want to talk over with you. I have read all of Dickens—have you? Which one do you think is the best? Of course the critics praise 'David Copperfield,' but I love 'Tale of Two Cities.' I can't ever read that last chapter without crying, and I've read it very, very many times."

So, in sheer joy of heart, the letter ran on and on. It was nearly ten o'clock when it was finally stamped

and addressed, and she slipped upstairs to find Burch in the front hall calling excitedly for Uncle Hank, who was just going up the stairs to his own room.

"I tell you I saw it just as plain as I see that lamp. Buster saw it, too."

"I reckon it was the lamp—the shine of it through the winder, you know," Hank argued calmly. "Don't disturb your auntie."

"What was it, Buddie?" inquired Hilda.

"A fire, out there in the brush by the irrigating ditch," Burch replied, glad to have a listener who might display some excitement. "Buster and I were coming over from the bunk-house, and we saw it in that vine there, all blazing. We ran as hard as we could and hollered to the boys to bring a bucket—and just before we got there it suddenly went out."

"Why, that's queer," laughed Hilda nervously. How careless of her to have forgotten the open shutter!

The letter was sent. She could not put it into the general mail. The secrecy she felt obliged to maintain brought some small twinges of conscience; yet it contributed an added thrill, too. She gave the missive to Sam Kee and asked him to post it when he went in to Dawn the next day.

There followed a time of anxious waiting. It seemed to Hilda that discovery would be certain if the letter came after she was gone and had to be forwarded. It worried her all the time she was getting ready, but the day before Colonel Marchbanks was due from Amarillo an envelope, addressed to Hilda in the fine, bold hand, arrived. As Uncle Hank sorted the letters over and apportioned them, she felt that the appearance of this one must shout aloud to him the name and all the marvelous, romantic history of its

writer. She snatched it so swiftly that she had to be called back to get a magazine and picture postal card which completed her portion. It was only in her own room, with the door locked, that she dared open and read. It began abruptly:

“Well, Hilda, I’m afraid you and I can see very little of each other while you’re in Encinal County. So far as I am concerned, you might almost as well be at the Three Sorrows.”

Hilda stopped there. She wasn’t going to cry. Nothing to cry about. Her glance came back to the letter. There was one more sheet. She turned the page and read:

“I probably didn’t make it clear to you about how I stand with the Marchbanks family. I get along without the people at the Alamositas, and they worry along without me; I couldn’t go to see you there, Hilda, or take rides with you, and I think you will stand better with them if you don’t tell them that you and I are friends—or acquainted at all, for that matter.”

At about this point of the reading, Hilda raised her head and looked around. Her eyes were bright and dry, and her cheeks glowed like fire. This was Pearse’s answer to her childish, impulsive letter, to the reminders of the time she sheltered him in the cyclone cellar. Hilda was as generous as an Arab. She didn’t want his gratitude—but, oh, she burned with an intolerable humiliation at this lack of return for her friendship! And yet the letter was not unfriendly. In conclusion, he spoke earnestly, urgently, of the value of a good education; said how sorry he was that his own had been broken off early, and how it delighted him to know that she was to have better opportunities than his had been. This was the closing paragraph:

“I was awfully sorry to learn from your letter that

you were so lonely, and had no young friends. But your coming over to the Alamositas will make that all right. They say Maybelle's a very nice girl, and I hear they have a great deal of young company at the ranch; only, little girl as you are, I'm glad Fayette Marchbanks isn't at home now, or likely to be back, it seems, while you are there. He's not the sort of fellow for you to make a friend of."

That was about all. He hadn't thought worth while to say anything about the books she wanted to discuss with him. He might have written about them. They could have corresponded while she was at the Alamositas, anyhow. She drew her wounded girl's pride about her with the declaration that she would never mention Pearse again to any one, never write to him again nor make any effort to see him. Then she thought miserably that this was what he had advised her to do in the letter. Her heart sank to the ultimate zero.

Meantime Hank had his own worries. A year's stay on a big, prosperous ranch like the Alamositas, within easy distance of more than one small New Mexican town—and he knew well how it went with young folks in a ranching community, where it is out of the question to draw any hard-and-fast social line. Quick courtships—even the ill-considered marriages of boys and girls who were scarcely more than children—those were the things that came about under such an arrangement. He was full of anxiety for his girl; she must not be sent unwarned into that sort of thing. He finally mustered up courage to go to Miss Valeria and say that, under the circumstances, he felt she ought to talk to Hilda about "goin' with the boys" and such things before they let her leave for New Mexico.

The little lady listened to him with a bewildered air,

which finally gave way to an embarrassed laugh. When he'd said his say, she dismissed the whole matter airily with:

"But, Mr. Pearsall, the child isn't 'out' yet."

"No," agreed Hank seriously, "but she's a-goin' out to-morrow, when Marchbanks comes through for her."

"You don't understand me," Miss Val said. "You don't get my meaning. At home, in New York, we used that expression—" She broke off, drew her brows a little, and the bright black eyes behind the glasses studied the ranch boss a moment before she went on: "Hilda's a schoolgirl—she goes to Mr. Marchbanks' as a schoolgirl. She's not out in society. Naturally, she won't be thinking of any of those matters you mention. I certainly shouldn't bring them up in talking to her—it might put foolish ideas into her head."

"You won't take it on you to speak to her?" Hank asked.

"Certainly not. Those people—the Marchbankses—have a daughter near Hilda's age. Of course, Maybelle Marchbanks isn't out yet, either. I remember the child when she was here, visiting the Capadine ranch. Mrs. Marchbanks can be trusted, I am sure, with the management of the social affairs of two school-girls. Why, Mr. Pearsall, in New York we shouldn't be thinking, much less speaking, of such things in connection with Hilda for—for some time yet. It is the custom there, you know, to introduce a girl to society—when she is through with her schooling, and has had, perhaps, some travel abroad—at a ball or other large affair. They tell me that now a luncheon or a tea is more usual. I haven't begun to trouble my head yet about which would be nicest for Hilda—when the time

comes. But I'll attend to all that. I'll attend to it, Mr. Pearsall. Don't give it another thought."

Hank backed away, nodding. When Miss Val began talking New York— Well, he could hear her words; but, as for getting any sense out of them—

"I've got to do it myself," he reflected, with some misgiving. "Lord, send me the right words."

He was fumbling after those right words on the evening of that day, as he sat beside Hilda in the after-glow on the side door-stone—the spot where he and she had lingered so often to exchange deep confidences. He watched her out of the corner of his eye. She was like a young bird with trembling wings lifted for flight. Yet there was pathos in her face too. And to that he had not the clew of Pearse Masters' letter in her pocket.

"Pettie," he began, looking out over the plain to where the planet of love hung luminous in the sky, "I spoke to your aunt about saying some little things to you that ought to come to a girl easier from her women-folks than from any one else; and—she said best not to put it into your head. Now, honey-girl, I know that if your own folks don't do it, there'll be them that will—and anybody that does, will be the wrong person."

There was a startled silence between them. Hilda turned eyes that were a bit frightened to his grave face. She had understood at once what it was of which he wished to speak.

"The wrong person?" She echoed him falteringly.

"Yes," he said, "the wrong person." He looked fondly at the slim shape beside him. Hilda's head was now turned away; he got only the outline of one thin, brown cheek; he couldn't see the look that was in

the big, black, long-lashed eyes—nor that Hilda had turned them away from him because she herself was afraid that look was in them. “You’re only a little girl—as yet,” he repeated it, as though by repetition he meant to make it true. “And still we’re bound to remember that there’ll be plenty of young fellers over there to notice you—and for you to notice. That’s what I’m trying to speak to you about, honey—and I ain’t finding it easy.”

A quick glance from Hilda; she hated to trouble Uncle Hank this way. She tried to help him out with:

“Fayte’s not going to be there—at first, anyhow. His father said he was sending him into Old Mexico—on business—he might not be back for nearly a year.”

Uncle Hank put that by with a little wave of the hand. Fayte’s connection with the rustlers was understood by every man on the Sorrows; his father’s lame explanation that the boy had been deceived by the gang was accepted silently. This sending him off to Mexico till the talk blew over was the best Marchbanks could do.

“I ain’t thinking about that feller,” Uncle Hank said. “You’d not make a friend of him—though in front of his folks you’d have to treat him nice. I trust you to handle that. You’re young, Pettie, but you’ve got good judgment. Just take what I’m saying as mostly a warning to any young person going out among strangers. Your way is paid over there. I wouldn’t take nothing for you as a gift from Marchbanks, though he wanted me to. I intended you should be free and independent, like your father’s daughter ought to be. Anything you don’t like—you can just pick up and come home.”

Hilda's hand went instinctively to her pocket. Uncle Hank talked a good deal like the letter there.

"Oh, well," she said, half bitterly, "if I'm such a child, Aunt Val must be right; you won't need to talk to me about—about these things for years yet."

Hank could not remember when Hilda had ever spoken to him like that. He couldn't know that she was answering Pearse's letter, making her little stand of maiden dignity with Pearse.

"Think so?" he asked gently. "I'm afraid you're mistaken, Pettie. You'll find yourself a grown-up young lady all of a sudden—and then maybe some of the things you have allowed to hang about will make trouble."

Hilda's only answer was a sort of inarticulate sound. Presently the old man spoke again.

"These here common working people marry very young, Pettie," holding the slim wrist and tapping his own palm with her hand. "That's natural, and right enough. You see how they live; there's nothing to keep them from marriage. They don't have to have education, like Charley Van Brunt's daughter. I see now that I myself didn't look at this thing right; seemed to me you was getting—or had got—pretty well all the learning you'd need—the reading of books and such to sort of fill out. I thought you felt that way, too, but the way you've took up with this idea of going over to the Marchbanks place shows me different."

"Oh, Uncle Hank!" Hilda protested, in a misery of self-condemnation. What would he think if he knew that most of the rapture over the idea of going to the Alamositas had been because of what he'd call "a young feller," who was working on an adjoining ranch? And she couldn't tell him any part of it. The whole

cyclone-cellar matter would have to come out, if she told him any. And it wasn't her secret. It concerned Pearse. Pearse had a right to say whether it should be told or not. She didn't examine very closely into her own feeling as to whether she would have told Uncle Hank if she'd felt free to. She let that go. He was speaking:

"I've always been so sort of drove for ready cash—and not liking to sell more cattle than needful, or to hitch any mortgages onto the old Sorrows. You haven't had a heap of things you ought."

"Oh, Uncle Hank—" the girl broke out again; he silenced her gently, and went on:

"But you have had pretty good schooling, and I do think that by the time you're through your work out yonder I can have the money to send you to college. Then, when you're graduated and got your papers to show for it, we'll talk about a European tower. Miss Valery seems to think that would be about the figger. I believe we can cover it for you. The ranch is doing better every year. It's coming up, Pettie, hand over fist. If that railroad should go through, as it seems it might, we'll all be rich before you know it. Even if it don't, I haven't a doubt but I'll be ready to put up the money—your money, of course, you understand, girl—for you and your aunt to go a-traveling, and for the biggest kind of a *baile*—or whatever shindig Miss Valery speaks for—when you git back—a young lady. Ain't that a bright prospect?"

The childish hand, hard from much horseback riding, with a good firm grip in its slim fingers, trembled in his, as Hilda answered:

"Yes, Uncle Hank; I'll do my best!"

He seemed scarcely to hear her.

"You're going out there—plumb away from me—to

a new life, at least for a spell. We don't neither of us know what you may run onto, honey. I'm just obliged to feel a—to—well, to fix it so't you'd see that your Uncle Hank would understand—do you see what I'm driving at, Pettie?"

"Yes, I know."

"Well, then, I'm a-going to tell you some things about myself—things I've never spoke to any one about. I expect you don't know your Uncle Hank was married?"

"Yes, Mrs. Johnnie told me—that time she made the first dresses for me."

Hilda spoke low, for Mrs. Johnnie was even then at the Sorrows, making the sewing machine hum while she got Hilda's outfit ready. Mrs. Johnnie had stood out for one "party dress" and constructed it from some uncut silks Miss Valeria had. That party dress, and some things Mrs. Johnnie had tried on, seemed to make Uncle Hank's warnings not unreasonable. He stroked the little hand he held with steady fingers.

"She died," he repeated, "but it wasn't that that broke my heart so; any man might lose his wife by death." He was silent a long minute; then he began on a louder note, as though resolved to go through with a painful thing: "You see, Pettie, she was a girl that I knew back where I was raised, in the Tennessee mountains. It's what happened to her that I want to tell you, so's you get my meaning."

He sat silent for a moment. Hilda waited breathlessly. Then he went on:

"Mattie's folks was well to do. They sent her down to the valley school—sorta like our sending you over to the Alamositas; see, Pettie? She ran away with a feller, from the school. It was a boy we all knowed—Judge Moseley's son. He was in school himself at

the time. She was just a little thing, younger than you are now. I had my mother, and the farm and the raising of my younger brothers and sisters on my hands; hadn't aimed to name marriage to Mattie at that time; but I never thought of any one else; and when she ran off with that Moseley boy, seemed to me my heart was broke smack in two. I got things settled for Ma and the young 'uns and lit out to Texas—that's where a Tennessee boy goes usually to better himself. I done well. My part of it ain't what I want you to notice, Pettie. It's Mattie's part that means something to a girl. It was seven years from that time I left Tennessee till I saw her again. And how do you think I saw her next time?"

He glanced up. Hilda was all eyes, all attention.

"Her and Alf came through my ranch—movers. You know what that means, Pettie. We don't get so many of them on the Sorrows, being off the main line of travel, but you've seen 'em—a ramshackle old wagon, a ga'nted team, a man on the driver's seat, looking out ahead of him, clear into the nevertheless, never noticing that the woman and children he's dragging around with him from place to place—no home, no comforts, no nothing—are just about perishing on his hands. Yes, that's what Alf Moseley had come to be—a mover. He had the itchy foot. You can't do nothing for one of them fellers. And Mattie—at twenty-four or five—Mattie was an old, broke-down woman.

"They had but one child—and Mattie had named him for me—Henry Pearsall Moseley. They stayed at my place longer than movers usually stops. I offered Alf a partnership, but he was aimin' to strike toward the Rio Grande, and what I could offer wouldn't hold him. But they stayed long enough, even

that time, for my heart to get just wrapped around that little feller that was named for me. He was four years old, and the finest boy of his age that I ever put my eyes on—bar none. Well, after that they come and went, as you may say. No harm to Alf, he didn't think no more of his own comfort than he did of the horses he drove or poor Mattie. Except for the time they went into the bottom country, the baby, Harry, throve well. They'd use my ranch for a stopping place when they couldn't git no further—had lost a horse or such. And finally, at the end of the Brazos bottom trip, when Alf was dead—climate in there killed him—and all but killed Mattie—she sent for me, and I went and got her and the boy.

“We was married before we started on the return trip. It was the only arrangement to make. Mattie—any girl that thinks she'll run away from school and marry some lively boy that she don't know how he'll turn out—well, I wish such a girl could have seen and heard my poor Mattie on her trip back to the ranch with me. She never mended in health, Pettie. I done everything I could, even to sending her back east—and it mighty nigh pulled the heart out of my breast to part with the boy. He hugged me 'round the neck with his little short arms and promised he'd take good care of his mother and bring her right back to me as soon as she was well.”

“Oh, Uncle Hank!” whispered Hilda, leaning her head against his arm.

“But she never come back. She died. At the time, I wasn't where I could have the boy with me, as it seemed. Jeff Aiken—husband of Mattie's sister—wrote that he had the little chap in school, that he was doing terrible well, and that it was Mattie's wish that he should stay there. I sent the money for him, same

as I'd been sending it to Mattie. Everything I had was for him—till— But that ain't what I started out to tell you. That's just an old man's sorrow, and the thing that broke me all up and took my ranch and left me the loneliest somebody in Texas."

"You hadn't any one left, had you, Uncle Hank?" Hilda found voice to say finally, when it seemed the old man would not go on.

"No. I hadn't nobody. But I'll tell you how that come, some other time, Pettie. What I'm trying to get you to notice now is that my poor Mattie ruined her life when she ran away from school to marry. She'd never have took Alf Moseley when she was older and had her full sense. It was the thing being secret—meeting Alf out without nobody knowing—and thinking it was great—that got her into it. That's what I'm warning you against."

Hilda nodded. She couldn't get out a word, so she just nodded. What would Uncle Hank think if he knew about Pearse Masters and the cyclone cellar? But that was in the past. And suddenly the knowledge that she would have been glad of secret meetings with Pearse over at the Alamositas—that it was only his letter, showing that there was to be nothing of the sort, that had taken all the glow out of going—brought the tears. Uncle Hank was very penitent when he saw them.

"Don't cry, honey," he begged, patting her arm. "Nothing to cry about. All these troubles I been talking of is in the past. Mebbe I shouldn't 'a' named 'em to you. You got bright prospects ahead. You'll be mighty happy over there, with a nice girl of your own age to go with, and a first-class teacher."

"Let's give it up, Uncle Hank," she said chokingly. "I don't want to go. I don't care about the education

or—or anything that there is over there in New Mexico. Really, I don't. I'd rather stay here—at the Sorrows—with you."

Hilda wiped her eyes and showed as clear a countenance as she could and drew up to face him. One of the boys came whistling along the path from the bunk-house. Sam Kee opened his kitchen door and threw out a pan of water.

"No, Pettie—no, you're just tired—and a little scared to-night. Uncle Hank's seen what it is you really do want—what you ought to have, anyhow. A chance to try your wings—to try your wings—"

CHAPTER XXIII

AT THE ALAMOSITAS

AFTER all, going away from home for the first time when you're nearly seventeen is a thrilling business. Hilda was the sort to get joy even out of small things—and the change from the Three Sorrows to the Alamositas, though it was but from one great ranch to another, was not small.

The Marchbanks ranch, most often called the Flying M, for its brand, got its Spanish name of Alamositas, "little cottonwood," from the number of those trees which grew tall all along the Juanajara River, which wound sluggishly through many of its pastures. At the Alamositas, headquarters was almost like a small village, with a big main house of adobe, two-story, built Spanish-fashion, around a court; numerous bunk-houses for the men who worked for the Marchbankses; manager's quarters, a blacksmith shop and the ranch supply store; standing over across the trail, opposite the front gate; inviting all sorts of comers and goers.

Hilda was given a large upstairs room all to herself; it adjoined Maybelle's, and she thought that would be nice, remembering vividly the plump little girl with whom she had played dolls in the tree roots on the lawn at the Sorrows. She found Maybelle Marchbanks still plump, and quite pretty; a year older than Hilda, she was very competent at all household matters, neat as wax, dressed quite like a young lady.

and with a great deal of ornament. She could ride, of course, but not as Hilda could, and she left the interests of the ranch to the men. She seemed to have forgotten all about that earlier time, and even when Hilda reminded her she was vague with:

“Oh, yes, I remember I was over in Lame Jones County once when I was a little girl—did I visit at your house?” It seemed to Hilda that so many interesting things had happened to this girl that it was perfectly natural she should have forgotten. For from the first morning when Miss Ferguson opened lessons, Hilda sensed the cross-pull that there was here. The lively interfering tide came right over from the store porch, where young fellows in bullion-trimmed sombreros, high-heeled boots and clanking spurs, were apt to be on hand to intercept the girls if one of them ran across on an errand. And there was always an errand, when Maybelle saw any one she liked there. Sometimes when she didn't do that, one or more of the boys sauntered across to the ranch house, even looked in at the schoolroom window to say hello and ask when lessons would be over.

Miss Ferguson, the teacher, did the best she could. Hilda realized at once that here was some one who knew twice as much as Miss Belle or Miss Bobbie, who had taught Uncle Hank's academy—a really good teacher from a well-known woman's college in the East. But Mrs. Marchbanks didn't seem to care how much the lessons were interrupted. It was almost as though she put greater emphasis on the girls having a good time. She had two lively, spoiled children of her own, Tod, the boy, seven, and Jinnie, five. Her immediate interest fastened upon Hilda's looks. She had followed on to the room the first day, gone in with the two girls, sat down on the bed with Tod and Jinnie on

each side of her, and gazed at the new member of her household with very admiring eyes.

“Hilda, dear—I’m going to call you Hilda, of course—you ought always to wear white.”

Hilda was pulling on a fresh blouse, making herself tidy for lunch.

“I don’t mean just a shirt-waist—a thin dress, with your arms showing through a little. They are too sunburned now—you’ve been careless with them—but I can soon take that off with buttermilk. I would just love to see you dressed in a thin white dress with a dark red flower in your hair.”

“Tod’s freckled like a hop-toad,” little red-headed Jinnie piped up, suddenly. “Muvver doesn’t take the freckles off of him with buttermilk. Could you, Muvver? Would they come off? I ast him once to let me scrub ’em off wiv sand—but he wouldn’t.”

“Tod’s freckles don’t matter, Baby,” Mrs. Marchbanks laughed. “Tod’s not a beautiful young lady like Hilda.”

“Oh—and I’m not a young lady—yet,” Hilda smiled and blushed, uncertain yet pleased.

“Well, I wasn’t prepared to find you quite so grown up, or so lovely,” Mrs. Marchbanks rose and gathered up her youngsters to go, “though Fayte told me you were a mighty pretty girl. You and Fayte are going to be great friends—aren’t you?”

Hilda didn’t know which way to look. Her confusion made Mrs. Marchbanks laugh, and she turned at the door to say, “You just wait till Fayte gets back; I’ll bet there’ll be a thin white dress found somewhere for you to wear, and a red flower for those dark curls.”

Maybelle, listening silently, had a curious air; dropping her eyelids half over her eyes in a way that kept

you from seeing any expression they had in them, but she shut the door after her step-mother and turned the key.

“Ma’s silly about Fayte,” she said coolly. “Did you see him over at your place?” And when Hilda nodded, “I think he’s mighty good looking—but when I say that, I praise myself. Don’t you think we look alike, Hilda? I wish he was going to be at home now—we always have a lot more fun when he’s here.”

Hilda nodded inclusively. It seemed funny to know so much more than they seemed to about Fayte’s last visit to Lame Jones County. But, of course, she would never breathe a word of it to any one here on the Alamositas. She found herself, like Maybelle, a little sorry that Fayte wasn’t at home; it would have been interesting to see how he would meet her. She was pleased when Maybelle remarked, as they were going downstairs:

“Pa said he’d sent Fayte to Old Mexico to be gone a year—and I’ll bet Fayte’ll be back in a week. He and Pa are always having blow-ups. Ma smooths ’em over for him.”

It was some days later that Hilda came into the schoolroom one morning on an argument between Mrs. Marchbanks and the teacher.

“I want to earn my salary,” Miss Ferguson was saying. “Teaching Tod and Jinnie doesn’t amount to anything. Such young children oughtn’t to have more than a half hour in the morning, and I’m not a kindergarten teacher. But these girls—Hilda’s the kind that could take a fine education.”

“Pooh! Hilda Van Brunt’ll be taking a husband—that’s what she’ll be taking—maybe sooner than any one thinks.” It was almost as though Mrs. Marchbanks had seen her, and wanted her to hear—almost

as though she were speaking to Hilda herself, as she finished, "A girl like that is bound to marry young. She'd better hurry up and have all the good time she can before then. You keep the lessons along, Miss Ferguson; the girls can learn enough, and enjoy themselves at the same time."

Hilda stole away, rather startled. If Uncle Hank had any idea what sort of views Mrs. Marchbanks held, would he have sent her, Hilda, to New Mexico? Well, it was done, and as for enjoying herself—that was exactly what she would enjoy—herself. So, in those first days, when there were long rides up into the mountains, for which Mrs. Marchbanks provided the lunch, and saw no harm in the two girls having two cowboy escorts, the frequent little gayeties at the house itself where some young fellows brought over a guitar and sat on the porch, with Mrs. Marchbanks bringing out lemonade and little cakes for the lively company—Hilda was sure she was just enjoying herself. It was lovely to be admired. She couldn't look into eyes that told her how pretty she was without her own eyes sparkling. Resentfully she thought of Pearse Masters, who practically called her a silly little girl and told her to stay in the schoolroom. Even Uncle Hank—well, he couldn't quite have known how things were going to be over here. This wasn't what he meant when he talked to her that night on the door-stone.

She took this first taste of a girl's good time into that world of imagination which would always be hers, dreamed on it, as she always dreamed on the things that came to her; and she bloomed like a rose in the bellehood that was hers, for it was plain from the first that the new girl at the Alamositas carried all before her; Maybelle took second place.

Six weeks after she left the Sorrows, Uncle Hank

came over. Hilda, wildly excited, rode in to Juan Chico, the little town where the railway station was, to meet him and ride out to the ranch with him. Only six weeks—and he caught his breath as he looked at her. What was the great change? The persistent flattery of Mrs. Marchbanks, Maybelle's example, had made her more careful of her appearance, yet, even if he had been able to place this, it would not have accounted for the new light in her eyes, the new confidence in her manner. Riding out she talked to him almost altogether about her studies. She was perfectly sincere in that; Hilda had an eager mind, and she enjoyed the teaching of a woman who could show her that there was so much more in a mere education than she had ever thought. And when they got to the Alamositas it seemed just his little girl Hilda who introduced her Uncle Hank with a true child's pride and delight to every member of the household, the cow-punchers, the very cats and dogs.

But there was no concealing from Uncle Hank's keen eyes the position she had instantly taken among the young men visitors in the house. That evening on the porch was like other evenings; a lot of boys in to see them, Maybelle, after a little joking and talk, wandering away to a quiet corner of the court with one of the callers, but Hilda surrounded by a noisy, competitive group.

Mrs. Marchbanks, sitting beside Pearsall at the far end of the gallery, looked on approvingly. She seemed to expect equal pride and approval from the old man.

"Hilda's a regular heart breaker, Mr. Pearsall," she sighed.

"M-m," grunted Uncle Hank, rather crusty, "I don't know as I have much use for the heart-breaking business. I don't want to see her'n broke."

"Oh—Hilda's heart is in no danger!" Mrs. Marchbanks laughed a little. "Look over there. Safety in numbers, Mr. Pearsall. You won't have to be uneasy about Hilda's heart till some one of them cuts all the others out."

"I reckon you're right." Uncle Hank looked and smiled in spite of himself. Three young fellows and Hilda were disputing over the possibility of dancing in the court there, if two of the others, who looked sulkily on, would oblige with guitar and harmonica. His girl was all right, her eyes shining, her gay words flying, as the men quarreled heartily over who should have the first waltz with her when one of these reluctant idiots could be got to play a waltz. To Hank's fond eyes she looked so very much alive in a world where so many are but half living—only going through the motions by a sort of formula—no wonder she was dangerously fascinating.

"And when *my* boy gets home," Mrs. Marchbanks was going on beside him, "there'll be another. Fayte will be *frantic* about Hilda."

Hank was only stopping one day. Riding over to the station in the morning he had a final talk with Hilda, which seemed on the whole quite satisfactory, though again it gave him cause to smile.

"Of course, Uncle Hank," she said demurely, "I understand that you didn't mean for me to sit about on the porch with young men and play grown-up, the way I'm doing here. I didn't really intend to, myself, but somehow it—it just seems to happen."

She tilted her head on one side and looked across at the old man out of the corners of such liquid eyes, the up-curved lips were such threads of scarlet, as inquired of him how affairs of the heart were to be kept away from even a child of this mettle.

"I expect you do all right, Pettie. I haven't a doubt that you never say a word you wouldn't be willing for your Uncle Hank to hear," he suggested, a bit slyly.

Hilda caught her breath. Then she glanced up swiftly and surprised a twinkle in his eyes.

"You know I don't—or—or do!" in some confusion. "I get as silly as the rest of them. Foolishness is all you can talk—it's all they want to hear. But, Uncle Hank," thrusting her pony in beside his to grasp his hand, enforcing her argument by small tugs on it, "it's lots of fun. I'm going to tell you something dreadful about myself. There were two of them that used to come here a great deal, and they were awfully good friends. Now they hardly speak to each other, and"—the voice dropping to an exultant, half-terrified whisper—"I did it."

"Hilda—you little skeezicks!"

He swung onto the train; she waited and waved to him almost till it was out of sight, then rode rather soberly back to the Alamositas. She'd necessarily let him go without any hint that a great deal of her interest in the young fellows she played about with so freely was a hope that one of them—all of them—would carry the news of her conquests to another young fellow, Pearse Masters by name, who hadn't cared enough about her to even suggest that they might write each other, since she was living in a house where he could not be a guest.

Uncle Hank's visit changed nothing—he saw nothing to change. Hilda still studied fitfully, played ardently, endeared herself to her teacher—and apparently at the same time was endeared with more or less seriousness to six or eight of the young fellows about her. Mrs. Marchbanks had a knack for dress and ornament. She pulled Hilda's hair down and did it

over for her, teaching the girl all the little tricks that bring out beauty. Hilda, a beauty lover herself, caught these up easily. She'd never thought much about her own appearance. Aunt Val's lectures said nothing about making herself attractive. Maybelle was the pink of neatness; not a bad example in that respect for any one to follow; if she used too much perfume and too many ornaments—why, you didn't need to imitate her there. And Maybelle became interesting at once when she admitted that she'd met Pearse Masters several times at the big dances and picnics to which every one goes in the ranching country, and that she thought he was awfully good looking.

Hilda told herself that she had got over feeling bad about him; her friendship with Pearse was like a book that you shut and put away on a high shelf. She didn't realize, herself, how many times she took that volume down and glanced into it with a good deal of regret, and that in spite of the fact that there were plenty of other volumes of the sort at hand, fairly begging her to read them.

And one experience was coming nearer, though she didn't know it. One day of moving air and mild sun she had ridden over alone to a side cañon of the small, sluggish Juanajara River, to get resurrection plants. Her saddle-bags were full of the strange, dry-looking balls which she would later put in water and see open out green and prosperous. When she got home Tod Marchbanks met her at the corral, full of importance over his news.

"My brother Fayte's come back from Mexico," he announced proudly. "An' you ought to see the things! He brought me a hair bridle, an' Jinnie lots of beads an' such. Maybelle, he brought her joolry—Mex'can fildygree—an' a *scrape* for Ma, an' a sombrero for Pa

that's got a gre' big silver snake round the crown. Hurry up—supper's most ready."

Now for the meeting with Fayte Marchbanks! She wondered how he would carry it off! He must know what they all suspected him of back at the Sorrows. While she was slipping out of her riding habit and getting washed, she decided that the new white dress would be the one to put on. She did her hair very carefully, a little dissatisfied at its plainness, but timid of adding ornament for fear of seeming to dress up for the new arrival. Then, when she was ready and passing Mrs. Marchbanks's door, that lady looked out and said:

"Here's a bunch of red geranium I saved for you, Hilda. It looks so well in your black hair."

"Oh, thank you!" Hilda nestled the fiery blooms in the dark curls just above the ear. "That's awfully good of you." And the two went downstairs together.

They were late. Everybody was in the dining-room. Billy Grainger and two young men from Juan Chico were at the house for supper, but the first figure that caught Hilda's eye as she entered the room she recognized instantly. There was no great change from the defiant, outlaw personality she remembered. He got up and came straight to her and was shaking hands before the colonel said:

"Of course, you young folks know each other?"

Mrs. Marchbanks, who had been talking to her step-son of Hilda's beauty, her many charms and many admirers, gave him a triumphant glance as she saw the surprise with which he greeted the girl. He had laughed at her talk, remembering the slim tom-boy with a dust-streaked face and stringy hair who made that wild ride and brought his father up in time to stop his rustling operations.

"You can't fool me with that sort of talk, mamma," he had said. "Hilda Van Brunt's no looker. Yes, yes—I know what you say about the ranch. Pretty is as pretty has, eh? She'll be half owner of my grandfather's ranch—the ranch that ought to have been mine. But she sure is not pretty, whatever you say."

And Hilda? As she shook hands, there was the instant memory of having seen and overheard Fayette and his father in that bitter interview by the creek-side. She was glad neither of them knew that she'd been there overhearing. When supper was done, and they were moving irregularly from the dining-room, Hilda found herself beside the returned prodigal.

"Don't you want to come and sit on the porch a while?" He spoke in a low tone, apparently for her ear only.

"Shall we?" she asked, raising her voice. "Do you think it's pleasanter outside than in the house, Mrs. Marchbanks?"

"Yes, dear, for you young folks," the hostess said indulgently. "I've got to put Jinnie to bed."

Hilda turned to Miss Ferguson, but the lady of the house made immediate demand on the governess for some trifling matter. Maybelle took occasion to secure both of the young men guests for herself; the three went down the steps and into the garden. Hilda found herself alone with Fayette, facing his half-quizzical smile, allowing him to bring a porch rocker for her, and sit down very close beside her.

"Well?" he prompted. One heavy black lock tossed down across his forehead, his long gray eyes shining in the dusk; he stared at her still with a look that was both questioning and mocking. "Say it—say it. You've got a bad opinion of me. You've been warned

against me." He laughed at the idea. "That day over at the Sorrows—"

"Oh, don't let's talk about that," said Hilda nervously. "Let's just forget about it."

"Suits me," said Fayte easily. "All the same, I've been wondering ever since if you were the only one that suspected— Say, Hilda, what did set you flying off to *Tres Piños* to warn dad that day?"

"Why—Uncle Hank sent me," she said incautiously. "He thought, maybe—because—"

"Pearsall." Fayte looked at her with narrowed eyes. "Then he was tipped off—as I thought—and there's another score to even up with the J I C bunch."

"No. No—you're mistaken. Uncle Hank didn't see any one from—from over here."

"But you did."

Hilda got to her feet, saying decidedly:

"If you will keep on talking about that—I'm going down where the others are."

"Not yet." Fayte rose too. They stood a moment. Tall, handsome, a man now, he was, after all, very much the same as the small boy who had blown her doll to pieces—and thought it was funny.

"I don't want to quarrel," she began, "but—"

"That's all right," Fayte laughed. "Good way to begin. Hilda, you're going to like me a lot, before we're done. You can't get away from me. Better not try to. And you're too pretty a girl to put on touch-me-not airs."

CHAPTER XXIV

“INVITATION TO THE DANCE”

FROM the first, Fayte Marchbanks's presence at the Alamositas affected the whole atmosphere there—and quite differently from anything Hilda could have imagined. Maybelle had said they would have more fun if he were home. Hilda wouldn't have put it just that way, exactly, yet everything was somehow changed—and rather exciting.

That very first evening at the dinner-table he began it. Hilda was conscious of some strain back of the general talk. It ran on jerkily for a time, and then Fayte sent one of his narrowed, sliding glances from her face to the colonel's and remarked:

“If I'd known sooner that you were here, Hilda, you bet I wouldn't have stayed down there on the border eating frijoles and operating in wet horses.”

The queer silence that followed made Hilda a little nervous, and she asked, smiling uncertainly:

“What are ‘wet horses’?”

“Don't be a bigger fool than you have to, Fayte.” The colonel scowled at his son. “If you'd really been mixed up in all the things you pretend—”

“Shall I tell Hilda what wet horses are, mamma?” Fayte interrupted unconcernedly, speaking to his step-mother, ignoring his father.

“Tell her whatever you please, honey,” Mrs. Marchbanks said easily. “She'll know you're only fooling. Jinnie,” to the child in the high-chair, “quit pounding with your spoon.”

“Well, then, Miss Innocence,” Fayte turned that mocking look on Hilda, “wet horses are, technically, animals that have swam the Rio Grande—in the night—and the good reason for their dampness is that they owe Uncle Sam a duty, which they haven’t paid.”

Hilda understood that Fayte meant them to believe that in the weeks he’d been away—sent from home by his father for bad behavior—he had been helping smuggle horses across the Mexican border. They all took it in their different ways, his step-mother not believing a word against him; Miss Ferguson interested, but puzzled; Colonel Marchbanks angry, as Fayte intended he should be.

“Whether you did or didn’t do what you’re hinting at, young man,” he said finally, “it’s a cinch you ought to be locked up for talking too much.” And he left the table.

“Father’s right,” said Maybelle dryly. “Pass me the butter, Fayte. Don’t pay any attention to him, Hilda. When he brags about those sort of things we all know he’s trying to string us.”

It was Hilda’s first experience of a man who made capital of disgrace. The few she’d seen so far—men on the dodge, Uncle Hank’s old partner, Tracey Jacox—these spoke differently of anything criminal they had been connected with—or spoke not at all of it. It had grown to seem to Hilda one of the decencies of life to maintain such reserve. Yet Fayte made his queer kind of boasting rather attractive. Like the rest of the household, she didn’t believe he was as black as he painted himself, but it was interesting always to see just how black that would be.

And mixed up with all sorts of talk about dubious stuff he’d been into, dangers he’d run, half crimes he’d committed, Fayte—as the days and weeks went on—

showed himself more and more in the character of her admirer. No stop at the pleasant half-way house of friendship; he was as carelessly over-confident in pushing to a more intimate footing with her as he had been in riding up to the Three Sorrows to rustle a whole herd of his father's cattle. It astonished and rather amused her at first to see how little her wishes in the matter counted with him. The other boys wanted her to like them, were careful not to offend; Fayte was only interested in liking her—if his feeling could be called liking—and he didn't a bit mind how much he offended. If she showed resentment, aversion, he only laughed and told her that some day she was going to love him just as hard as she hated him now.

Her only defense against this aggressive, almost threatening sentimentality, was to keep up the half-joking quarrels that young people use to cover all sorts of situations. For it seemed to her the two of them were forever together, and that the whole household kept out of their way and left them so. Apparently Fayte had no concerns of his own to interfere with his hanging around. He would follow her from the breakfast table, linger at the schoolroom door till Miss Ferguson had to put an end to the whispered conversation. And when the lessons were over and the girls came out, there he would be lying on his mother's lounge in the sitting-room, or out in the hammock, a pile of paper-covered novels on floor or ground, a circle of cigarette butts and feathery ashes around him; then, if he didn't see them first, Maybelle would call him to come and join them, or Mrs. Marchbanks would send him.

Hilda was often at her wit's end; for there were never any of the other boys about now, whose presence might have helped out; Colonel Marchbanks had

put his foot down on “all that sort of fooling,” had told the girls that for the rest of this term they must attend strictly to their lessons; there would be no more of this wasting their time with those young loafers. It was almost, Hilda thought, as though they wanted to throw her with Fayte and keep her out of the way of other people.

Then one afternoon Maybelle, up in Hilda’s bedroom, helping her clean her jewelry, asked with a significant glance:

“These all the rings you’ve got, Hilda?”

“They’re all I have with me,” Hilda said.

“Oh!” Again that queer look from Maybelle. “I thought maybe there was one you weren’t showing. I’ve got one nobody around the house has seen.” She waited for Hilda to say something, then finished, “But I’ll let you see it—if you want to.” She fumbled a moment at the neck of her blouse, got hold of a little ribbon there, drew out and slipped on the third finger of her left hand a solitaire of considerable size. Hilda stared at it.

“Why, Maybelle—where did you get it? It looks like—”

She broke off, and Maybelle said with one of her sly smiles.

“Yes—doesn’t it? Looks just like an engagement ring. Maybe that’s what it is. I’m not saying.” Then, suddenly, “Where’s yours?”

“Mine? Oh, you mean my solitaire—like that? I’ve got one, only mine is set lower and—and it’s—” She stopped, a little confused. She didn’t want to say that the stone in this ring—which had been her mother’s engagement ring, and was now lying in the safe deposit box in the bank at Dawn along with some other jewelry and valuables that would come to her

later—was larger and handsomer than Maybelle's. Maybelle herself was turning her hand and flashing the gem with a great deal of satisfaction. Suddenly she stopped and asked in an aggrieved tone:

"Well? Aren't you going to show me yours? I think you might—I trusted you to see mine."

"I—I can't," Hilda faltered. And then as Maybelle continued to eye her. "It isn't here."

"Oh, all right—all right for you, Miss Hilda Van Brunt. Anyhow—I found out what I wanted to know. I thought Fayte was lying, but I see he told the truth—for once," and she flounced into her own room.

Hilda was too angry to follow and ask what it was that Fayte had told the truth about. She learned of it later from Lefty Adams, who clerked in the store, and was almost like a member of the family at the Alamositas. She and Maybelle—Jinnie tagging along—had gone to buy marshmallows that evening, and Lefty watched a chance to say to her aside,

"No callers over to the house these days, hey? Not getting lonesome, are you? Oh, no—I reckon Fayte's enough all by his own sweet self. The feller that's got a girl's promise usually aims to be enough."

"Lefty, what do you mean by that?" Hilda asked. And when he explained that Fayte was telling all the boys that he and Hilda were as good as engaged—on the sly—she laughed; not because it was funny, or she liked it, but with a sudden appreciation of how probable that must look to any one on the outside. That laugh settled it. Her denials, though they finally became indignant, had no effect. She saw that Lefty, anyhow, was convinced, as Maybelle had been, that what Fayte had told was the truth.

As they came out onto the store porch carrying their

tin boxes of marshmallows, Jinnie capering at their heels, Maybelle caught Hilda's arm suddenly and shook it, exclaiming,

“Look there! Funny we didn't see that as we went in.”

Tacked to one of the posts, almost directly in front of them, was a placard, roughly lettered, by no very skilled hand:

“DANCE AT GRAINGER'S SATURDAY
EVENING, MAY 3.

ALESSANDRO GALINDRO'S MEXICAN
STRING BAND.

BARBECUED SHEEP—BARBECUED
YEARLING—A GREAT TIME EXPECTED.

COME ONE—COME ALL!

AND BRING YOUR WIFE AND KIDS AND
YOUR SISTER-IN-LAW!”

Below had been added—apparently with a burnt match

“ESPESHUALLY THE SISTER-IN-LAW.”

Jinnie watched their faces as they read; and when, at the last line, they both laughed, she pulled at Hilda's skirt, squealing.

“Tell me! Tell me!”

“All right—be still and listen,” said Hilda, and began to read the poster slowly to the child.

“It says kids! Can I go? Can I go?” Jinnie hopped up and down in her usual excited fashion.

"No—none of us will get to go," said Hilda, a bit disconsolately. "Maybelle, do you suppose, maybe, your father—?"

But when she turned toward where Maybelle had stood, she found that her companion had dropped back to the doorway and seemed to be speaking to a man there. Hilda had noticed him when they first went in, standing far at the back of the store. All through her little talk with Lefty Adams, she was vaguely aware that this person watched them with the air of wishing not to seem to do so. He was no cowboy, Hilda knew, from the way he was dressed; yet he was not an eastern man—a tenderfoot. He belonged to the West; and she had too little experience of its small towns to recognize the type, to guess that this was, as Lefty would have described him, "A tin-horn gambler."

Almost at the instant that Hilda turned, Maybelle sent an uneasy glance over her shoulder; then—for all the world as though she did it on purpose—she dropped her box of candy; the lid flew off, and the marshmallows scattered all about. Instantly the man lifted his hat with an air of exaggerated politeness and said in a good loud voice,

"Allow me, Miss."

Hilda gazed in open-eyed astonishment, as Maybelle, making no reply that she could hear, promptly knelt down beside the man who was picking up the marshmallows, and the two of them, their heads together, proceeded to gather every one off the dirty porch floor and put them back into the box. It was such a ridiculous—such an incredible performance—that Hilda stood completely at a loss. They were just getting the last marshmallows back into the box—and, Hilda thought, talking in swift undertones—

when Lefty Adams strolled from the store, saw what had happened, and called out:

“Great Scott, Maybelle—you don’t want to eat that stuff after it’s been in the dirt! Lemme give you another.”

Maybelle let him. The kind gentleman, who had helped her pick up marshmallows that were not fit to eat, walked away. Maybelle didn’t even look after him. Lefty still lingered in the doorway. He rolled a cigarette, then pointed with it to the placard, the grin on his face plainly advertising the fact that he himself was the author of that last line.

“See our invitation? That’ll be the biggest dance we’ve had this year. What you girls going to wear? Think I’ll flash my sky-blue-pink satin with the eighteen ruffles—make all the other boys jealous.”

“Yes, we see it,” said Maybelle. “But that’s all the good it’ll do us. Pa’s said that we shan’t have any company or go to any dances till we’ve finished this school term with Miss Ferguson.”

“Oh, Great Scott, Maybelle! That’s plain murder. You tell the colonel that he’ll have an up-risin’ on his hands if he keeps you away from that dance.”

“Huh,” said Maybelle, “I won’t tell him that—nor anything else. I know a better way.”

It was at the supper table that evening that Hilda learned what Maybelle’s better way was; for Fayte announced that the whole family—Miss Ferguson and the kids included—was going to the Grainger dance.

“Well, thank goodness the quarantine’s lifted!” said Maybelle, as though this was the first she’d heard of the matter. Miss Ferguson looked about her and remarked, half apologetically,

"I suppose there might be a good deal of interesting local color in a dance like that."

"Might be!" grinned Fayte. "Miss Ferguson, that dance'll furnish you one solid chunk of local color. It's sure going to be what you call a very characteristic entertainment."

It seemed to Hilda, when once she had the assurance that she would get to go to the dance, that the Saturday night for which it was set delayed and dallyed on its way down the aisles of time in an exasperating fashion. All her thoughts of the coming evening centered around one point. She didn't dare ask direct questions; she knew that she couldn't command her features or her telltale color if she did. But she came at it indirectly, casually, in her talks with Maybelle, asking,

"Who all will be there?"

"Everybody—just everybody that lives within twenty miles; and some from as far away as sixty," Maybelle answered. "The Grainger's are great for that. They don't stop at tacking up notices. Billy and Ed get on horses and ride for days giving invitations just like Pa does when he's electioneering."

Everybody. That would certainly include Pearse. Well—if she was to see him—she was to see him; the readiness was all. And the days went on, with hurried lessons in the morning, long afternoons of planning and preparation. Not till Saturday afternoon, during a last rehearsal of the dresses and the way they were going to do their hair, was Hilda sure enough of herself to venture another of those casual questions: A young lady named Esmond—was she likely to be at the dance?

Maybelle spoke through the pins between her teeth; she was doing her hair at the glass.

"That Galveston girl—niece of the manager of the J I C? No. She's gone home. Thought I told you—he's to follow later—they'll be married in Galveston. Some girls have all the luck. Bet I could have got him away from her—with a fair chance. Fannie May wasn't what I'd call pretty. But she had him right there on the ranch—and Pa won't let a J I C put foot on the Alamositas." She sighed. "He's awfully good looking. Do you like my hair this way, Hilda?"

"Why—yes. You've got it a little too loose. Let me pin it in for you."

Hilda's voice didn't amount to much; but she was thankful to be able to speak at all. Of course this was what she might have expected. Yet she hadn't. No, no—she hadn't. Going to Galveston, to be married—married! But maybe it wasn't true. It might be—why, it might be just like what Fayte was telling about herself. To-night—to-night at the dance. He'd be there. She thought she would know when she looked at him, heard him speak—even if he told her nothing about Fannie May Esmond—whether it was so or not.

She came to herself with Maybelle giving dry little details concerning the girl from Galveston: her looks; how she had dressed; the "pieces" she played—small, definite things that seemed somehow to make her a very living presence to Hilda, and the idea of her engagement to Pearse very real. Her Boy-On-The-Train; her fugitive of the cyclone cellar; Pearse Masters, who, present or absent, had filled a place in her life and thoughts that no one else ever touched or came near to—he was going altogether away from her—almost as if he died.

Well, affairs were going on, just as they always do,

just as though she'd heard no dreadful heart-shaking thing. She helped to pack the two party dresses which were boxed and sent on ahead in the buggy with Mrs. Marchbanks, Miss Ferguson, Tod and Jinnie. It was about twelve miles to the Grainger ranch, and they started early, so that they need not drive fast. Hilda, Maybelle and Fayte, on their ponies, left the Alamositas in a great, golden haze of sunset. Maybelle had no escort except her brother; even Lefty Adams—who really didn't count, Hilda would have said—was told shortly, when he proposed to ride over with them, that those were "Pa's orders." That's what Maybelle said, and tried to appear sulky about it, but it was plain to Hilda, as they set off, that she was really, in her quiet way, very much pleased with the arrangement.

As the three rode, almost entirely silent, the gold and crimson flamed, and then faded in the west. Dusk stole on; a cooler breath came sweeping up from the south; one by one the great white stars began to show in the sky about—and Fayte proposed a race. They let the ponies out a bit, not so very much, but Hilda soon saw that Maybelle was being left far behind them.

"Shall we wait for her—or go back?" she asked, pulling up.

"We won't do either one," Fayte said. "We'll go right ahead with our race. Mabs doesn't want us—and we don't want her."

"She doesn't want—" Hilda had held back so long that they could now dimly see Maybelle's mounted figure following them slowly—and she was not alone.

"Oh," said Hilda; "why, there's some one with her. Let's wait and see who it is."

"No—come on. Come on, I say. Hang it all—

I know who that is with Mabs. It's a man that can't come to the dance. He wants to get a word with her. Come on. Leave them alone. You and I want to be alone, too—don't we?" And he reached over and caught her bridle rein.

“Stop!” said Hilda desperately. “Oh, Fayte, don't let's be sentimental.”

She jerked at her rein, and her horse reared free. “Let's race, then!” she gasped, and dug her spur into the plunging animal.

He bolted forward on the run. After a moment Fayte followed, laughing under his breath, stung more strongly to the pursuit by her reluctance, calling out,

“All right. It's a race. You know what the stake is—and I'm bound to win!”

After that Hilda felt that there was nothing for it but to arrive among the lights and people at Grainger's before her escort. They would have a late moon, but the night had begun to darken. In the trail there was small danger from dog holes, and her pony was carrying less weight than his. Still she thought longingly of a short cut as she heard swift hoofs behind her, and leaned down, using voice and touch of the heel, with a good horsewoman's objection to punishing her horse.

It was Fayte's temper which won the race for her, after all; he slashed his pony with the quirt, and it began to buck, wheeling head for tail. By the time he had it settled once more into its pace, Hilda was nearly a mile ahead of him.

She slowed up when she felt safe to do so, and even waited for Fayte at the edge of the crowd outside the Grainger yard, so that they rode through the gate together. As he lifted her from her pony, she said to him in an undertone,

"I won, but you had no right to say what you did—we weren't racing for any stakes."

"Oh, no, you didn't win," Fayte laughed at her. "That race isn't over. We'll finish it on the way home."

And at that moment Maybelle rode in—alone.

"I like the way you two ran off and left me," she said as she got down from her pony without her brother's assistance.

"Who was that with you?" Hilda asked in her nervousness.

"There wasn't any one with me," Maybelle returned placidly. "You and Fayte rode off like two wild Indians. I wasn't going to run my pony lame—I need him to ride home on."

Maybelle was talking more than usual, also she looked wonderfully lit up and excited, beyond what just going to a dance accounted for.

"Excuse me I—I thought there was some one with you," Hilda faltered out, embarrassed, glancing from Maybelle to Fayte, who only grinned sardonically and didn't say a word.

"Well, there wasn't." Maybelle gave her a swift sidelong look. "I don't care to ride races and get myself all hot and mussed up when I'm going to a dance. Come on, Hilda." And she led the way to the house.

At a table beside the main entrance of the great rambling adobe structure Miles Grainger was stationed, repeating with the ingratiating urgency of an auctioneer,

"Gentlemen, will you kindly lay your guns on this here table? A heavy six-shooter ain't a thing to be dancing in, nohow. If it should ketch on one of the ladies' dresses and go off, it might take somebody's

toe. 'And if we have any—little discussion—as folks is liable to do at a dance, you gentlemen will get along better without your guns. Take 'em off, boys. Take 'em off.’”

There was already a goodly pile of weapons before him, and as Hilda's amused eyes studied the heap, she noted that Grainger was addressing himself rather pointedly to her escort, and that the big fellow bent and whispered to Fayette, a persuading hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, all right—I don't care, I was only fooling,” Fayette answered negligently, drawing out and laying down a long, blue-steel six-shooter. “This way, Miss Hilda,” and he guided her to the door of Mrs. Miles' bedroom, which was doing duty as a cloak room. As he turned away he whispered,

“Don't forget—we'll finish that race going home.”

“Stop! Wait!” cried Hilda. “If you say that, I won't ride home with you. I'm in earnest, Fayette Marchbanks. I will not.”

“I won't say it then,” smiled Fayette, his tone implying that whatever he might or might not say, he would do as he pleased.

CHAPTER XXV

THE DANCE AT GRAINGER'S

THE big room they went into was a roil of confusion; two large beds covered with great cocoons—each one a baby, wrapped in its own quilt or shawl; several mothers of somewhat older children—though babies still—trying to convince their offspring that it was time to go to sleep—and not being very successful at it.

Jammed in anyway, were girls and women getting out of riding skirts and into dancing trim, excited, laughing, squabbling over pins or a chance at the mirror. Mrs. Marchbanks pushed through with the big box that held the things for Maybelle and Hilda. She helped them to dress, calling back and forth to the others, introducing Hilda to every one, hardly taking her gaze off her, even while she hooked up Maybelle's waist. Hilda's glimpse in the glass had shown her that her color was flaming high. How big and bright it made her eyes look! She was almost as beautiful in the party dress as she had dreamed of being.

"There, you're both all right now," said Mrs. Marchbanks at last, and whispered in Hilda's ear as she pushed them toward the door, "Mabs looks nice—but you're a beauty!"

Maybelle, who had certainly heard her step-mother's words, didn't seem to mind. It appeared that she had something to think about that pleased her.

Outside, the big room was full of people. Maybelle had been right; surely everybody within twenty miles was there. It was a very big room indeed, with an earthen floor. The Grainger place, like the house at the Alamositas, was adobe, and the canvas ceiling, tacked to beams that were unpeeled logs, bulged with every draft. The deep window-seats were occupied by young couples. Some of the girls wore shirt waists and one or two from Juan Chico, or visitors bringing the fashions of the larger towns, had evening gowns of silk or chiffon. Hilda was very sure that her own dress, made by Mrs. Johnnie, would bear comparison with any of them. Mothers were still hurrying youngsters across the corner of the room. Occasionally these held back and had to be lifted and carried, protesting, away from the lights and the music which was beginning to tune up.

Alessandro Galindro's sheep-shearer musicians were softly touching the great harp, a violin and two guitars. The lamps were already beginning to make the room hot. There would be no lack of partners, for the young men outnumbered the girls almost two to one. They were riders from the ranges, in full cowboy regalia, young fellows from town, in clothing nearer ball-room usage. Hilda knew a good many of them—had cared a lot for their admiration and their liking. If Maybelle hadn't said that about Pearse—this afternoon when they were trying on the party dresses—she felt that this would have been a proud and happy moment. As it was, most that might have been enjoyment was swallowed up in the thought that if she met Pearse to-night—and saw when she met him that what Maybelle said was true—she must show him—

What was it Hilda was going to show Pearse

Masters? At thought of it, whatever it was, her head went up, her face glowed till she shone out among the other girls as though they were pictures on a canvas, and she one that had been painted on something transparent so that the moving, rising, bending fires of life itself shone through. Oh,—she was likely to show Pearse Masters!

“The J I C crowd hasn’t come yet,” Maybelle whispered, after a quick glance around, “but will you look at old Mr. Hipp?”

A sun-baked ancient with a wrinkled frock coat ambled out into the open of the dancing floor, displaying the horseman’s bowed legs.

“Hello, Hippy—going to dance?” Lefty Adams shouted.

“Sure,” crowed the aged one. “Cain’t you see I’m dyked out for dancin’? Do you figger that I cain’t dance? Jest watch me a spell—you’ll see me cuttin’ ’em right along with the yearlin’s.”

“Come on, quick,” whispered Maybelle. “That old thing is fixing to ask one of us to dance. Let’s go down where Fayte is.”

Hilda was following perforce, since Maybelle had not let go of her wrist, when somebody halted them both. She glanced at the tall figure, a glance that despite the effort of girlish pride, herded all her blood in one great pulse. The breath paused on her lips as somebody said,

“Hilda!”

Now was the time for dignity and reserve. She raised her eyes and tried to look coolly at Pearse, but she lowered them instantly before his gaze.

She never knew when Lefty Adams took possession of Maybelle and led her out to dance. She was not aware of Fayte’s coming from down the room, push-

ing people out of his way to get to her, and then halting, glowering and listening. She had schooled herself to show Pearse a front of indifference, of smiling unconcern, when she should meet him. But, after all, this almost young lady was the same Hilda Van Brunt whose eager little face with its great questioning, welcoming eyes Hank Pearsall had seen first looking out of the El Centro stage, and thought how open a way happiness and pain would find to that young heart. She had no skill at building barricades, at wrapping veils around her spirit. It just would rush out and answer with artless candor whenever life hailed it. At the utterance of her name by Pearse in that tone, the pride and resentment she had tried to gather about her melted away from her clutch like smoke-wreaths.

She tried in vain to steady her gaze beneath his, to hold that highly desirable attitude of friendly indifference. As they stood together looking into each other's eyes, the earth floor beneath her feet seemed to sink gently and slew around a bit; or was it that a great hand lifted her and turned her bodily about, so that in a flash all things were changed; she saw them—at a new angle?

Fayte Marchbanks, over there, with his half insolent flattery, his open pursuit that had been disturbing, yet somehow fascinating—he and it were as though they were not. She forgot that her first dance would be due to him as her escort. The musicians had finally got their instruments tuned; the violin sent out a little cry, the great harp throbbed and twanged, the lesser beat and strum of guitars answered, and all launched away on the music of a Spanish waltz; Pearse said something, she hardly knew what. She had a swimming sense of sweetness and relief as his arm went

lightly around her waist, her hand was clasped in his, and they swung forth on the recurring surge and ebb of sound. Down the long room they circled without once stopping. They crossed close by the dark-faced musicians, and came slowly up the other side.

"Hilda"—Pearse found words by this time—"I hardly know you—yet it could not have been anybody else in the world!"

She looked up into his face and smiled a bit, making no attempt to reply.

"I saw you from across the room," he went on eagerly. "I couldn't believe my eyes. Why, when I think of the little girl I saw last—"

He broke off and Hilda laughed at the recollection of her stained, torn, cotton riding dress on that occasion, her sun-burned face, streaked with dust and perspiration, the soaked hair sticking to it.

"I must have looked a fright that day," she half whispered.

"No—of course you didn't!" Then he added, "But—but such a child, Hilda! And now, all in a moment—"

"Oh, it's been a good many moments." She did try to make her tone a bit sarcastic, though her voice was tremulous. "And maybe you only thought I looked such a baby. I'm nearly seventeen. You"—she tried to laugh—"you offered me the kids at the ranches to play with."

"I was just a plain fool," said Pearse. "I'd got used to thinking of you as a child—and I—but you'll forgive me, Hilda, and," eagerly, "give me the next dance and let's sit it out. I've got so many things to say to you."

In their absorption, they did not notice that harp

and violin were stilled. Now Fayte's voice broke in upon them.

"Mightn't you folks just as well quit when the music does?"

They looked about them. The other couples were seeking seats.

"I'm to have the next I suppose, Hilda," Fayte said, rather stiffly. He stood squarely between them and the chairs to which Pearse would have led his partner. He spoke only to the girl herself.

"Oh, why, I—I just promised that to—"

Hilda glanced up, in confusion. Pearse's tone, cool, decisive, solved the situation.

"She's promised it to me, Marchbanks," he finished for her. "The room's hot. We were going to sit on the porch." Then he added civilly, "She thought you'd excuse her."

Fayte's eye flashed. He seemed to restrain a hot retort. But Pearse, choosing to see nothing amiss, pushed past him and kept himself between Marchbanks and Hilda. The press of dancers around the door opened out to let them through. Hilda went almost without volition of her own. She had a sense of a great listening pause in her being.

Outside the door, Pearse passed ahead of her, leaping down off the porch end, reaching up to lift her and settle her comfortably on its edge.

"This'll do," he said. "We'll get half a chance for a little talk here."

From his seat on the grass below he studied her, a radiant, victorious Hilda, in the first exquisiteness of girlish bloom. She got only a reflected light on his face, yet she could see that he was trying to identify her with the little brown girl he had found playing

romances in the cyclone cellar, the half-seen girl at the camp-fire beside the trail from Sandoval County, who had just been making—as she told him—a full hand in a long, hard cattle drive, the dusty, unkempt rider of that last interview in the little hollow by the creek, so few months ago.

“Tell me,” he said suddenly, “why didn’t you give me a chance to see you before? You must have been out here in Encinal County several months.”

“Exactly three, Pearse.” Hilda’s eyes were dancing. “I’ve just about finished my first term with Miss Ferguson. She’s a splendid teacher. You’ll be interested to know about my studies. That’s what you said in your letter.”

“My letter?” Pearse looked foolish.

“Yes,” nodding her head seriously. “It was an awfully good letter, Pearse—sort of noble—but it scared me, too. I was hardly hoping you would speak to me if you met me on the street over here. It was such a relief to have you ask me to dance to-night—as though we were really friends, after all.”

“Oh, come, Hilda—it wasn’t as bad as all that, was it?” he pleaded.

“Or worse.” Her delicate, three-cornered face was all eyes. She caught her breath and took the plunge. “And—and I hadn’t heard then, didn’t know till late this afternoon—about—about your going to Galveston.”

That was as far as she could trust her voice. A curious darkening of everything—darting lights in it that were like pain. Pearse’s voice speaking swiftly.

“Oh, that’ll be all off—now I’ve seen you.”

What did that mean? What could it mean? Had she heard it right? Yes, for he was going on:

“Couldn’t drive me out of Encinal County—while

you're in it, Hilda. Remember those days in your old cyclone cellar at the Sorrows? I'll never forget them—that's certain."

He would never forget. Ah, but he'd not reminded her of them before with such glowing eyes, spoken of them in such a tone!

"But you were going to Galveston to be—" she couldn't finish. The words, "to be married," just wouldn't come. Pearse didn't seem to notice. He was all taken up with her—with the fact that they were sitting there together on the porch edge, people all around, but no one paying any attention to them.

"Yes," he said finally, "I was going down to the wedding. Several from the ranch are. Fanny May's marrying our assistant manager, you know, and she's the manager's niece. Nice girl. But you and I aren't interested—are we?"

All Hilda's forces deserted in a body to the enemy. The overwhelming sweetness of the moment frightened her into hasty speech.

"Oh, Pearse," she whispered, "I—do you know why I came over here? Uncle Hank didn't really want me to. I could see that. But he let me choose—and I chose to come—because you were here. I did. It's the truth."

People at the tub, getting lemonade. Too close to risk even another whispered word. Pearse reached down into the shadows and caught a slim hand that swung over the porch edge. The last time he had held it, it was a brown little fist, the palm showing small round callouses from ungloved use. Now three months at the Alamositas, under the tuition of a lady who believed in, and honored, the tradition of lily-white feminine fingers, had brought it into its own. The Rensselaer hand, famous through generations for

its pink palm, tapering fingers and filbert nails, lay in Pearse's and when those slim fingers curled up and clasped his own, they took a grasp upon his heart-strings.

"It's awkward—your being with those people," he said, when they again had a chance not to be overheard. "But we'll manage."

"You don't seem to find Fayte much in your way." Hilda laughed a little, because she was so happy.

"Not much." Pearse's tone was fairly preoccupied.

"I really must give him the next dance," Hilda sighed. "But I don't want to ride home with him—and I suppose I'll have to."

"Of course you won't. I'll see that you don't. Here he comes now. Well—the dance—if you must." And he helped her up.

From the doorway behind them Fayte's voice, raised in a curious jeering anger, answered some one there:

"I put my gun back on, because I want it on, Billy Grainger. I'm liable to catch cold without it."

He strode through the door. They got the outline of his figure in the light, with the bulge the weapon made under his coat.

"Oh—don't have any trouble with him," Hilda whispered. "You heard him. He's armed."

"And I'm not armed," said Pearse, quite loud enough for Fayte to hear. "There won't be any trouble, Hilda. Don't you be scared." Then to Fayte, himself. "Hilda and I are old friends. She may have told you? Well—I want to be sure of it, because she's going to give you this dance—I suppose that's what you came after?—and as a friend of hers I want you to take off that gun you're packing before she does so."

"I'll take it off when she asks me to," Fayte returned, but there was no real defiance in his voice, and when Hilda made the request, he was rather glad to be rid of it.

Fayte had his dance. Then there were other partners for Hilda—many of them; she could get out of dancing with him again. Pearse had gone straight to Mrs. Marchbanks, and now sat beside her, talking to her. Hilda wondered what they were saying. Later, she saw him dancing with Maybelle.

When Fayte caught sight of this couple, his sister plainly with her whole battery of fascinations brought to bear, he was furious. The waltz over, he got her outside and began:

"You dance with Pearse Masters just once more, Miss, and I'll see what dad's got to say about the man you rode over here with to-night."

"Let go of me." Maybelle shook her arm free. The two dark faces so alike confronted. "I rode over here with you and Hilda. If it comes to telling things to pa—I guess I'll have a little something to say that you don't want told. Who fixed it for me to ride with Gene—while you went on with Hilda?"

She turned and went back into the house; her brother, swearing under his breath, flung away toward the corral for such consolation as was to be found among the rougher fellows who were drinking down there.

Within, the Grainger dance, a great success from the start, was in full swing.

"They need one more couple here," Pearse Masters greeted Maybelle as she reëntered. "Come on," and they joined a set where Hilda and Billy Grainger stood as one of the head couples. Big John Martin, famous all over the range for his improvisations, was

“calling off,” dealing heavily in freehand epithet, comment and admonition.

“Now balance—balance all—and cut ’em to one side,
Swing—*swing!* Now chase your squirrels as fast as you
can ride!”

There was applause and laughter from both dancers and lookers-on.

“Gents to the center. All Hippity-hop;
Hipp’s the youngest calf of all the blame’ crop.”

The ancient grinned. Some of the boys sounded a mild “Yip-pee!”

“Ladies, circle ’em, circle ’em, then,
Cut your partners out of the pen.”

Big John’s admiring eye encountered Maybelle.

“Miss Maybelle of the Alamo-seet,
She’s the lightest on her feet.”

“Yip-pee! Johnnie, old boy, come again!”

“First couple to the center—Bill, stir your lazy bones,
And lead the figger pretty with the beauty from Lame Jones
Yonder on the side porch there’s a tub of lemonade.
Swing—swing your partners. All promen—ade.”

Supper was to have been served at twelve o’clock; but a little after eleven the dust kicked up by the dancing feet from the hard earth floor became so thick that they could scarcely see each other’s faces. Even Big John’s stentorian tones broke off occasion-

ally in a sort of barking snort. The company had just retired somewhat worsted from a polka, when an inspired genius in cowboy boots and clinking spurs was observed with a bucket of water sprinkling the floor.

"Hi, hi, you Red LeGraw!" bellowed Big John from his seat on the edge of the musicians' table. "For the Lord's sake, what you doin'? Quit that! Do you aim to bog this dance down right here?"

LeGraw stopped and confronted Martin, the bucket in his left hand, while he gesticulated with his right, flinging large drops of water into the bystanders' eyes.

"Well, I've had two partners mighty nigh choked to death, an' I ain't a-goin' to—"

Big Martin sneezed at this point, a sneeze that fairly shook the solid adobe walls. Then he began to get off the edge of the table. LeGraw set down the bucket and squared his shoulders. There was a backward movement in the crowd about. But Billy Grainger's voice fell soothingly on the disturbance.

"Aw, say, boys, don't worry about it. Supper's ready, anyhow. Come on, people, and eat. We'll get this floor fixed by the time you're done your suppers."

Out to the side yard went the company, sniffing and wiping its eyes, and streamed over to the tables made of rough boards laid on barrels, where the barbecued meats were served with bread, potatoes roasted in the ashes, coffee in tin cups, and pies, cakes, preserves, and sweetmeats, that had come from scores of baskets. Fayte, with Hilda, was among the first to go; Maybelle and Lefty Adams followed close. Pearse Masters, with an eye on their movements, took out Mrs. Burkett, from over Caliente way, a compara-

tively new neighbor of the Flying M household, and a warm friend of young Masters. They sat just across from the Flying M party.

Hilda, intensely aware of his presence, did not lift her eyes to look at him. She never knew what she ate, or if she ate at all. They walked back to the house after supper, Pearse and jolly, loud-voiced Mrs. Burkett somewhere over to the left of Hilda and Fayte in the semi-obscurity; and that cheek of Hilda's, that shoulder and arm, seemed to her to glow and palpitate in great electric waves, as she answered Fayte at hasty, joyous random.

In the house, the floor had been, as Big Martin somewhat discontentedly expressed it, "hoed off into pretty decent shape." Presently came "the round-up," the cowboy's own cotillion, in which the couples are all in one great set, each pair going through every all-around figure. Pearse came and asked Hilda, and with a throb of joy touched with fear, she rose. Under cover of the round-up's boisterous romping, and during the long waits, these two talked eagerly, swiftly.

"You're not going to ride home with that fellow, Hilda."

"I don't want to, Pearse, but—"

"You're not going to—dear."

The final word was so low that Hilda didn't actually hear it—she was only thrillingly certain that it was there.

At the end of that dance, the Alamositas party was leaving. Pearse must have known that. He went right along with Mrs. Marchbanks, gathering wraps and belongings, carrying Jinnie. Hilda saw, with a sinking heart, that her pony, saddled, stood near the buggy along with Fayte's and Maybelle's. There

was Maybelle herself. Fayte was coming from the corral. Lefty Adams rode up.

The buggy was double-seated, carrying four. Pearse pushed past Lefty Adams, tucked in robes and bundles, around the children, and reached a hand to help Hilda with:

"Hilda's going to ride home with you, Mrs. Marchbanks. She's too tired for the pony. Lefty will lead it over. Good night."

"Well, I must say—" Mrs. Marchbanks unconsciously lifted the lines. The shivering impatient ponies sprang away at a lope. What Mrs. Marchbanks must say would have to be said on the way home, for her hands were now full looking after the team she was driving.

And, oddly enough to Hilda, no further mention of the matter was made during the drive. Miss Ferguson saw nothing strange in the new arrangement. An eastern woman, it seemed to her natural enough that a girl who had raced to the Grainger ranch and danced as much as Hilda had, should need rest. It was in the hall at home, in front of her own bedroom door that Mrs. Marchbanks said,

"Hilda, I'll have to speak to the colonel in the morning about this. You know—or maybe you didn't know?—that he doesn't allow any of the J I C men on the ranch."

No need to answer that. Pearse hadn't come on the ranch. He hadn't offered to. But how splendidly he'd handled the situation. How Fayte gave ground before him. She went silently into her room and shut the door.

CHAPTER XXVI

AS MAYBELLE SAW IT

HILDA waked next morning after but an hour or two's sleep. Last night she had been sure she couldn't sleep at all. She'd lain for a long time, it seemed to her, going over and over everything she had said to Pearse, all he'd said to her, bringing back his every look and gesture.

Now, as she opened her eyes on last night's party dress lying over the chair, last night's ornaments strewing her bureau top, the happy sense of security that had come in dreams, that had pervaded those dreamy waking thoughts, threatened to leave her. Pearse wasn't going away to be married; he was more her friend than ever; he was more charming, finer even, than she remembered him; to be with him was more delightful—but—

Oh, why hadn't she managed better about Pearse? Why hadn't she said to Mrs. Marchbanks last night that she'd known him a long time—that her father and mother had known him and his parents years ago? The fatal flaw in that was that she hadn't mentioned it when she first came over to the Alamositas. And that came about because she'd deceived Uncle Hank about him. She sighed and looked about her room, wondering how late it was.

There came a tap on the connecting door; she knew that sharp rattling knock; Maybelle must be up and dressed already; then she heard Mrs. Marchbanks saying:

“Don’t wake her. Plenty of time when she comes down stairs. She’ll surely want to go—any girl would.”

But Maybelle had already stepped inside and shut her stepmother out. Last night, when they were alone together, the girls had been very silent; no talking over the dance. This morning Maybelle stopped in the middle of the room and stared half frowningly at Hilda, sitting up in bed smiling at her, a tumble of dark hair over her shoulders.

“Hilda—what’s the matter with you this morning?”

“Nothing. Do I look awfully tired?”

“Tired!” Maybelle turned to the bureau, and continued to study Hilda’s face as it showed in the glass there. “You don’t look as if you ever had been tired in your life—or ever would be. Riding twenty miles—racing at that—and dancing all night seems to agree with you.”

“I guess it does.” Hilda slipped out of bed and into a bathrobe and began to lay out what she was going to wear. Maybelle settled herself on the bed edge.

“Run along and get your bath. I’ll wait for you here. Something I want to talk to you about.”

Hilda came back, rosy, refreshed, declaring:

“I’d like to go to another dance to-night. I never felt so utterly rested in my life.”

“All right. That’s what I want to talk about. Mother’s been afraid you’d be too used up to care to ride over and see the doings on County Day—it’s tomorrow, you know.”

“I did know,” Hilda said doubtfully, for Fayette had been talking to her about County Day. So far as she could see, it offered only a chance for him to hang about her and push his usual tactics of monopolizing

her. "I'm not sure I want to go, Maybelle. I don't think we ought to break up the lessons so much."

"Don't you?" Maybelle waited a long minute, then added just three words:

"He'll be there."

Hilda, bent low over tying her slippers, tried to think of something careless to say, and finally ejaculated weakly:

"Oh—will he?"

"Yes, he will. Everybody goes; small parties; just the Burketts and Lefty Adams and some of the other boys in our crowd. But you'll get a chance to see him again—if I help you."

Hilda glanced up, startled; Maybelle was smiling at her meaningly.

"When there's somebody you want to see, and you can't get a chance to without sneaking it—"

"It isn't the way you think—"

"How do you know what I think?" Maybelle interrupted. "What you blushing so for? I'll bet anything that I've got that it is—and more so. You're carrying on with a man that your folks don't know anything about. Well—I'm sort of glad. Helps me out."

"I'm not—"

"Yes, you are. If it wasn't a secret affair—you'd have told Ma and Pa as soon as you came over here that you were acquainted with Pearse Masters—that he'd visited at the Three Sorrows. Caught you that time!" Maybelle looked like Fayte when she grinned that way. "Now I'll tell you what I'll do. You help me out and I'll help you out. There's some one in the town crowd that'll be out at the picnic grounds County Day that I want to see—that I've got to

see. I guess you know who it is. Same fellow that stole a ride with me on the way to the dance last night. The one you saw in the store the other day. You do what you can to get me my chance to speak to him, and I'll get Mrs. Burkett to invite Pearse Masters to eat lunch with her. Pa can't say a word if Mrs. Burkett gives the invitation—and then throws in with us, and she's going to do that."

"He won't come," said Hilda faintly.

"Oh, won't he?" jeered Maybelle. "Well, I wish I was as sure that I'd get a chance to talk to the one I want to see as I am that Pearse Masters is from now on going to go to any place he thinks he'll see you. He'll camp on your trail, all right, if I'm any judge. Huh," with a little excited giggle, "didn't you like the way he put it all over Ma? Say—he's the kind that runs things his own way, isn't he? The Masterses were rich. He's been used to money—in the East—and in Europe. Does make an awful difference in a fellow. I don't wonder you're crazy about him."

"Maybelle—" Hilda broke off. What was the use? Maybelle's mind—her way of looking at things—was her own. Hilda couldn't say to her that the friendship between herself and Pearse Masters was a very different thing from any secret affair she, Maybelle, might have with that older man, with his strange, hard face. From the window where she stood, Maybelle glanced sharply over her shoulder at Hilda; then, as though she were answering an argument that had been carried on aloud, said in a flat voice:

"Well, there's Mrs. Burkett turning in at the store, now. Shall I go over and fix it so she'll invite Pearse Masters? Shall I—or shan't I?"

"Yes—go—quick!" cried Hilda, all in one breath. "Hurry. She might be gone before you get over there."

The two girls raced down the stairs, passed Fayette in the hall; he looked around and called, "What's the grand rush?" But they didn't stop. Half way to the gate, Hilda caught up little Jinnie, who was playing, and hugged her tempestuously.

Five minutes later, Maybelle, returning from her errand, found the two of them sitting on the Bermuda grass, playing cat's cradle. Maybelle whispered:

"I made her invite him. She wasn't going to, but I told her he was an old friend of yours, and that your folks thought a great deal of him."

"Oh, Maybelle—you oughtn't to have said that last; it isn't true."

"Whiskerin' secrets! Whiskerin' secrets!" squealed Jinnie. "I hear you two girls whiskerin' your secrets!"

"I thought that was what you said." Maybelle's face was as innocent as a pan of milk. "Anyhow—it's done now. You just keep quiet—and it'll work out all right."

Hilda was quiet enough, outwardly; but she could never have told how she got through the day that followed. Yet she did get through it without actual betrayals.

Maybelle was in the kitchen, making tamales for tomorrow's lunch. Hilda, at a desk, elbows on it to prop her face into studying position, had no realization of how time passed. She had drifted so far away from her surroundings that Miss Ferguson's hesitating, embarrassed voice startled her, saying almost in Maybelle's exact words:

"Hilda—what is it?"

“What is what?”

“If there was—anything—if you needed advice—you could come to me, you know.”

“Advice?” Hilda came to herself with a jerk. She glanced from the book in front of her to her teacher’s face. “I don’t need anything, thank you. I am all right. Everything’s all right.” Poor Miss Ferguson—what would she know? What could she do, or say? No use. You had to keep such things to yourself and do the best you could with them. She seized her pencil and went to work again, saying softly, without looking up, “You’re very kind—but it’s all right.”

CHAPTER XXVII

OLD MAN HIPPI'S STEER

THE Flying M crowd and the Burketts had agreed on a place all to themselves in the willows along Caliente creek. The colonel said he intended to try for some plover up there. Hilda, riding with Maybelle and Fayte, watched eagerly as they neared the picnic grounds, saw that the Burketts were already there ahead of them; out of their vehicles, off their ponies, moving about a camp-fire and spreading a tablecloth.

"There's Lefty Adams and Billy Grainger," commented Maybelle, softly. But nobody said, "There's Pearse Masters."

There was no need to say it. Fayte, glancing aside at Hilda's glowing face, might easily have been aware whose was the tall figure moving beside Mrs. Burkett across from the B Z B ambulance. Even Miss Ferguson, looking back from the buckboard and catching sight of her pupil, got some guess as to that secret happiness which was transforming her. Pearse, hurriedly placing Mrs. Burkett's basket and coming to help Hilda down, got Colonel Marchbanks' shoulder turned to him with a grunt; the colonel spoke afterward, low and angrily, to his wife. But what did it matter? Pearse's look and gesture as he swung Hilda from her saddle, and they stood a moment gazing in each other's eyes, suggested that the two of them were alone on the Staked Plain.

"Well, I declare! I thought he was going to kiss

her—didn't you?" Maybelle observed to her brother, whose only answer was a black look.

The hurry of getting the Flying M lunch spread out, of finding a place on the coals for its coffee-pot and its kettle of frijoles, covered, but did not conceal, the state of affairs between Hilda and Pearse. By the time the party was settled around the long tablecloth it was plain that the colonel and Mrs. Marchbanks had a disturbing consciousness of it. Nobody could fail to note the glances that passed between the two. Pearse sat close enough to speak unheard by the others, and Mrs. Burkett, being a woman and therefore a match-maker, looked with smiling defiance at her neighbors, as she raised an already round and hearty voice another notch or so to cover their whispering. Altogether, things began to be somewhat strained before the meal was over.

Jinnie Marchbanks, from the first, had dotted on Hilda; and took an instant liking to the new man, who had been nice to her at the Grainger dance. She sat between the two, or rather slightly in front of their dropped hands which sometimes thus found an opportunity for joining. Hilda wasn't aware of what she ate and drank—or if she was eating or drinking at all. It didn't even infringe on her joy that the Marchbankses, excepting always Maybelle, seemed to be trying to make an interloper of Pearse. Every one else appeared to like him. She could see he was popular and had a standing of his own. And he showed himself very openly and decidedly her special friend—her property, Maybelle would have said.

Lunch was eaten and cleared away. It was two hours later; every known game that would keep the group together had been proposed and carried on as long as the young folks would stand for it. The thin

echoes of shouts and laughter came across from the farther end of the big picnic ground, where the town crowd from Juan Chico had long tables that the restaurant men supplied. It had not been noticed that the children were no longer with them till Tod and Jinnie with the Burkett youngsters came surging into their midst, announcing that they had been up the creek, and that there was a steer bogged down there.

"He's dest a-swingin' his horns and goin' 'Mrrr! Mrrr!'" sputtered the excitable Jinnie, while Tod came in grandly,

"'F I'd had a rope, I'd 'a' snaked him out o' that mighty quick."

"S'pose we sa'nter up there and have a look at him?" suggested Lefty Adams, throwing away his cigarette butt and reaching around for his saddle, of which he had been making a pillow. He cinched it on the pony deliberately. "Hi, fellers, what do you say? Shall we go and pull a steer out of the mud?"

"You boys mind what you're doing," said Colonel Marchbanks from where he lay under a big juniper, his hands clasped behind his head, a cigar between his teeth. "Those fellows are due to go on the prod when you drag 'em out of the mud. Don't turn any cavorting steer down the creek here on us."

Three or four young men had hastily saddled, mounted and wheeled to follow Adams.

"All right, Colonel," Lefty called back over his shoulder. "Us girls'll be powerful careful. We're kind o' scairt o' cow-brutes ourselves."

Then he caught his hat from his head, slapped it down in a loud "flop" on the pony's neck, and clattered out of sight along the trail, leading the way with a long "Yip-pee!"

Among the group that rode at his heels were both

Pearse Masters and Fayte Marchbanks. Maybelle caught Hilda's arm and without a word dragged her in their wake.

"Now," she whispered urgently, "now's your time to get a word alone with him—and help me. I want to slip across to that town crowd without Pa or Ma seeing me. Won't take me but a minute. You wait for me here by the creek, and we'll go back together afterward. They'll think we've been together all the time."

No time to debate. The girls ran blindly up the trail beside the creek. It was the quickest way for Maybelle's enterprise too. Rough, twisty going; breathless, they swung around a clump of scrub—and there right before them was the steer, sunk nearly to his knees in the soft mud. The young fellows sitting their ponies about him, joking over the enterprise, hadn't gotten sight of the two girls. Maybelle pulled back a little, out of range; it was no part of her plan to be caught by her brother in what she was doing. Lefty Adams was rolling a fresh cigarette, one leg thrown over the saddle horn. He slanted a glance at the unfortunate one in the mud who was still, as Tod had said, shaking his head and grumbling, rolling bloodshot eyes.

"Huh! One of old man Hipp's lazy H's," drawled Lefty in a disgusted tone.

"That's what he is." Fayte Marchbanks began to re-coil the rope he'd been loosening from his saddle horn.

"Old man Hipp!" sniffed Sam Cole. "Anybody that wants to, can pull a steer out of the mud for that old skeezicks!"

"Aw—we ain't going to pull it out for Hipp," argued Lefty. "Just going to snake the long-horn

out for fun. Go to it, fellows. First one speaks has got first go. Who wants to dab a rope on him?"

On the instant Fayte Marchbanks caught sight of those light fluttering dresses on the path below. Here was a chance to show off before Hilda.

"I'll snake him out!" he cried, sat forward in his saddle, and with a flourish his rope flew out and settled over the broad, swinging horns. Fayte was pulling in the slack, making fast and starting his pony, when Pearse Masters, glancing toward the path below, called out sharply.

"Hold on, Marchbanks! There's some one afoot down there." It was the first word that had passed between these two since the night of the dance, and the red surged up in Fayte's dark face, his eyes gleamed. His answer was lost in the queer, yelping bellow of the steer as the rope grew taut. The other boys laughed. One more heave and the brute would be free.

"Hold on," Pearse repeated. "I tell you there's some one afoot down there on the path. Give them a chance to get out of the way!"

But with a great kicking and splattering and lashing out of gaunt, powerful legs, the steer had already hauled free from the mud, gone almost down, rolled partly over—and Fayte's rope slipped from his horns!

"Rope him! Rope him—some of you!" Fayte yelled, coiling frantically at his own rope so that he might send it out again. But no one else was ready with a rope. The steer scrambled to his knees—to his feet; now on firm ground, free, blind with fury.

The cheer the boys sent up when Fayte made his successful cast, the shouted words between him and Pearse, had reached the picnic party back at the camp-

fire and started them running up the path. They were still out of sight of what was happening as the steer, tail up, charged those unmounted figures.

"Run, girls!" yelled Fayte. "Why the devil don't you run?"

But Hilda, dragging at Maybelle's arm, knew why; the other girl was paralyzed with fright. She stood rigid, and Hilda could not leave her.

In the one fleeting instant Hilda saw Pearse crowd his pony against Fayte, saw his arm go over as though striking a blow. But the hand that shot out toward Fayte came away with a loaded six-shooter in it, and on the instant Pearse fired.

The shot caught the beast in full gallop; with one last plunge his nose dropped to earth; he flung a complete somersault, his kicking hoofs cutting close past Hilda's head; then he lay still.

Pearse was off his pony and running to the girls. His cheek bled from a cut. When he reached over Fayte to jerk the pistol from its holster, they all had seen that young man turn and strike at him. A small, jagged tear was made by the glancing blow of a heavy ring, dark, Mexican gold, which Fayte always wore.

So much Hilda saw, and then the party from below came up on the run, Colonel Marchbanks ahead, Mrs. Marchbanks panting close after, catching at her husband's arm, begging him not to get excited.

"Let go of me, Evelyn." He shook her off. "Now you"—he faced Pearse—"haven't you any better sense than to go dragging a steer out of the mud when these girls were here afoot—and children playing around? What the devil do you mean by it?"

Fayte Marchbanks got down from his horse, still white, but very defiant. The other boys looked to

him. None of them would speak until he did. There was an awkward silence for a moment, then he said,

"Hold up. I guess we were all into this thing. Reckon you're right. We ought to have had better sense. But it was Masters who shot the steer."

"Did, did he?"

"Well, he saved these girls' lives," said Mrs. Burkett sharply. "Good thing one of you had sense enough. What were the rest of you doing?"

"Why, you see," Lefty glanced sidewise at the colonel, "wasn't another rope in the crowd ready for use. Feller that roped the brute had just used his'n, and the rest of us hadn't got ours out a-tall. That's the way it happened, Ma'am. We none of us saw the girls—unless Fayte did. He was facin' the right way to see 'em— Did you, Fayte?" The inquiry was put with great innocence. Fayte answered it:

"You go to the devil! What difference does it make that Masters happened to be quickest on the 'draw? One or the other of us would have shot that steer, if he hadn't."

"Oh, Masters is quick on the draw," grinned Lefty, "even when he draws from another feller's holster—and gets a smack on the jaw for doing it."

All the cowboys were grinning now. This thing of Pearse Masters being blamed—in any part—for Fayte's reckless behavior, tickled their sense of humor.

"Lots of fuss about nothing," Fayte muttered, and he scuffed negligently at the dead steer, which Jinnie and Tod were already investigating.

"All right," Colonel Marchbanks raised his voice; he understood now where the fault lay. "If you boys want to rave around and kill cattle for fun—I suppose you've got the price. Evelyn—get those children out of the way here. You girls go back down

the creek. We've had about enough picnic for one day. You can get ready to go home. Where's Maybelle?"

"Right here. Been here all the time, Pa." Maybelle's arm was slipped suddenly around Hilda's waist. She spoke innocently, but Hilda could feel her panting.

Colonel Marchbanks herded his household down the path.

"Well, let's have our supper anyhow, before we start back," said Mrs. Burkett, going to the baskets.

But Colonel Marchbanks decided that his folks should eat their supper at home; Miss Ferguson and Maybelle were started at the packing and getting ready, the children sent to wash their faces.

Lefty and Sam Cone had ridden in with Fayette; apparently Pearse was still up the creek at the scene of the accident. After a cautious look about her, Hilda started back that way. Out of sight of the others, she came on Tod and Jinnie lingering in the path.

"Where you going?" Tod got in front of her.

"Just up here. I'll only be gone a minute. Don't tell any one where I am—will you?"

"We won't," Tod agreed much too easily. "I won't tell him."

Hilda ran along the path a few steps when a saw-edged shriek from behind stopped her, turned her. There was Jinnie throwing herself bodily on her brother, pounding him fiercely, while he ducked and dodged the best he could—it was against family rules for him to hit back at Jinnie.

"Yes, he will tell!" squealed Jinnie. "Buvver Fayette's goin' to give him a korter-money for tellin'!" She grabbed at Tod's hay-colored hair; he pulled free

and ran. "Git him! Git him! He said he wouldn't tell—and he's running right now to tell Buvver Fayte—and get 'at korter-money!"

"What's the matter, kids?" It was Pearse, leading his pony. Hilda turned to him instantly, crying out,

"Oh, Pearse—you won't let it go like this, will you? Everybody ought to be told just how it was."

"What's the use?" Pearse came close and took her hand. "Fayte knows how it was. The other boys know. The colonel could find out—if he wanted to. You and I don't care. You'll see that Marchbanks will pay old man Hipp for his steer. That'll show he knows whose fault it all was."

"Yes—and Maybelle. I thought she'd say something," said Hilda.

"Oh—here you are, Hilda," Mrs. Marchbanks came up, Jinnie at her heels. Tod had found some one to tell, if not Fayte. "Run back, Jinnie. Get your face washed, dear. We're going to start home in a few minutes. I want to talk to Hilda." Pearse, lifting his hat, led his pony past them, then checked and looked back to where Mrs. Marchbanks was already pulling Hilda down beside her on a fallen log.

"I'll see you on the way home, Hilda," he said quietly and went on.

"Well"—Mrs. Marchbanks stared after him with an offended air—"he doesn't seem to have any doubts about what he'll do, does he?"

Hilda was silent. Mrs. Marchbanks looked around at her and began hastily with a speech that sounded as though it had been prepared.

"I'm sure you didn't mean to make trouble by the way you've behaved with this Pearse Masters. You're just young and thoughtless. Fayte's got a heart of

gold, and he's perfectly devoted to you. But he's hot-headed, and if you—"

"I wish you wouldn't talk to me this way, Mrs. Marchbanks," Hilda protested.

"But a beautiful, fascinating girl like you has a great responsibility, Hilda; sometimes the very salvation of one of her boy friends may depend on her."

"Oh, please don't!" Hilda got up; Mrs. Marchbanks got up with her, still talking urgently as they started slowly back.

"You could make anything of this boy of ours. A little wild—any high-spirited boy is—but he only needs steadying down. You be nice to him, Hilda. Be kind to him."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CLOSING OF A DOOR

THE six young people on their ponies came stragglingly together at Alamositas headquarters. They checked there a little awkwardly, as though waiting for the big family carriage to come up.

Pearse had ranged his horse up to Hilda's as they left the picnic place on the Caliente, and without invitation or permission, or anything being said one way or the other, had ridden the whole twelve miles beside her. Maybelle, in an excited, defiant mood that Hilda had never seen in her before, laughing loud and playing tricks, skylarked with Lefty and Sam, galloping, all dust and noise, sometimes ahead, sometimes behind the other three. Fayte hung persistently at Hilda's other side. He looked black, but said nothing. It was clear to her—and the assurance thrilled her—that he was afraid of Pearse. The Mexican boy ran out and opened the front yard gate, and Maybelle, leading the way, called gayly:

“Come in, all of you. Mr. Masters, stay and have supper—the boys are going to,” paying no attention to her brother's angry, astonished glare. But Lefty and Sam rode on, with hasty, muttered excuses. Pearse shook his head at the supper invitation, but moved with them slowly through the gate.

“I'll run on ahead and get things started.” Maybelle jumped from her pony. “Come on, Fayte—you help me.”

"I'm only waiting till the colonel gets here, Miss Maybelle"—Pearse's tone was cool and civil—"I'll be on my way then—thank you just the same for your invitation."

Pearse's words covered the fact that, having come on Alamositas land against a settled understanding, he had no intention of seeming to run away before he had shown himself here to the man who had issued that order. Maybelle stopped where she was, the rein of her pony over her shoulder; Fayte didn't even dismount; they waited in silence, drawn back to the edge of the gravel so that the big carriage, when it came, would have room to turn. In it rolled finally, and it seemed to Hilda that every one riding in it was staring at Pearse, as it made the sweep and the colonel threw his lines to the waiting Mexican boy, got out and turned to help out his wife, Miss Ferguson and the children.

"Well, Pa," Maybelle strolled forward with this new, jaunty air of hers, "aren't you going to speak a word? I don't even remember hearing you say back there at the creek that you were much obliged to this young man that shot the steer and kept your oldest daughter from getting killed. You are obliged to him—aren't you? Even if you could spare me pretty easy—there's Hilda to think about. What could you have said to Mr. Pearsall if she'd been killed?"

So far, the colonel had kept his back to them; now he twisted around and looked at Maybelle, then past her at the others. His glance lingered longest on his son, and Fayte swung down with the air of one who had got an order, came around to help Hilda off, but she shook her head and sat in her saddle, waiting for what the colonel would do or say. Maybelle laughed hardily.

"Make you acquainted with Mr. Masters, Colonel Marchbanks," she went on. "Ever meet the gentleman before? Hilda has. She says she's known him ever since she was a baby."

"She does?"

There fell a curious silence after the colonel's two words, only the movements of the ponies, Jinnie's tired whimpering as she pulled at her mother's hand, the creaking of saddle leather making itself heard. At last Marchbanks, looking Pearse up and down, observed dryly:

"Funny Pearsall never mentioned you to me."

"I don't think it's funny."

Pearse's reply seemed to cover a good deal. But what it covered was not for explanation here.

"You don't? Then you're not a friend of his—only of Hilda's? That it?"

"That's about it," agreed Pearse coolly.

Hilda clutched her bridle rein in fingers that shook, as she looked at the two men facing each other.

"Pearsall is Hilda's guardian," Marchbanks said sharply; and once again it flitted across Hilda's mind how, years ago, he had tried to oust Uncle Hank from that place. "I'm not. But till you have his permission you can't visit her in my house."

"I had no intention of attempting to do so, Colonel Marchbanks," Pearse returned steadily. "Good night, everybody." He wheeled his pony. "Ride with me to the gate, Hilda," and she found herself following him, the people they left at first letting them go silently and then seeming to begin to quarrel about it.

"Pearse," she cried, bringing her horse up beside his, "what a shameful way to treat you—after—They know well enough that Maybelle and I might have been killed if it hadn't been for you."

"Never mind about me. I don't care how they treat me." He glanced carelessly back toward the group at the porch edge. "It's you I'm thinking of."

"Well, I care!" Hilda's voice shook with anger. "I feel as though I never wanted to see one of them again. I'd like to go straight home, if it wasn't for—"

"Better not do that," said Pearse uncertainly. "Not right away, anyhow. But you and I are going to be friends, aren't we, Hilda? Even if I have to go over to the Three Sorrows and eat humble pie."

"Oh—would you come?" cried Hilda breathlessly.

"Of course I'll come," Pearse said. "But your Uncle Hank, as you call him, may treat me about as Marchbanks did just now. Had you ever thought of that?"

"He wouldn't. And if he did—"

"Well, if he did—you'd have to choose between us—wouldn't you, Hilda?"

"I couldn't—Uncle Hank—" The words came almost unconsciously. A moment to think and Hilda never would have said them. For the Pearse she'd known before to-day—before the night at the dance at Grainger's—would, she was sure, at the sound of them have ridden away and left her. This Pearse didn't. He held in his impatient pony, and they sat looking at each other, close.

"That's the way you choose between us, is it?" he asked.

"I'm not choosing," Hilda cried in distress. "I haven't any choice. You don't understand, Pearse. If it was my own father, I might. But Uncle Hank didn't owe me anything—he wasn't paying a debt he owed me—and he's given everything. He's got nobody but me. I couldn't. Don't ask it."

Through this snatched moment of talk, they had been conscious of the wrangling of the Marchbanks family, back there by the porch. Now the voices went up to an angry climax; some one started down the path toward them.

"All right," said Pearse hastily. "Then you won't go—just yet, anyhow? Not till I've seen you again? . . . Here comes our friend Marchbanks." Pearse reached for her hand. Holding it, speaking low and rapidly: "Stay here till I get the chance." His hand tightened down hard on the one he held in a farewell pressure. Then he loosened the reins, started his horse, and said in a good loud voice, "See you soon again, Hilda. Good-by for the present," and went off at a lope.

Of course the colonel heard that last—and, of course, Pearse intended he should. Exasperated, unable to retaliate, as she went through the gate he did that unforgivable thing—reached up and took hold of her pony's bit with a jerk.

Instantly she was out of the saddle. She'd not go back to the house, led like a bad child. Marchbanks flung the rein to the waiting boy and followed at once. Not a soul on the porch now. They went through the front door almost together.

Hilda walked into the whole family; Fayette over at the farther end of the big dining-room, apparently getting himself something to eat at the sideboard; Maybelle, half-way up the stairs, looking back across her shoulder, making a little sign to Hilda—Maybelle was thinking only of her own affairs and the possibility of Hilda, under pressure, letting out something about them; the children were pulling at their mother, begging for their bread and milk. Mrs. Marchbanks tried to shove them off with Miss Ferguson. They

didn't want to go with the teacher. The two women were moving slowly in the direction of the dining-room arch when Mrs. Marchbanks caught sight of her husband and Hilda at the front door. She came toward them.

"Hold on a minute, Hilda," the colonel was saying, "I don't want you to make any mistake about this. Understand—you can't stay in my house and keep up an affair with a fellow like Pearse Masters."

Hilda stopped short; her face flamed as though it had been slapped.

"I'm not keeping up an affair—with anybody. You've no right to say such a thing to me, Colonel Marchbanks!" She looked about; all the eyes were upon her, "And I think I'd better not stay in your house, anyhow."

"Now, don't go and make her mad, Lee." Mrs. Marchbanks came over. "She's tired and excited. Of course she's going to stay with us. We're all sort of upset this evening. It's no time to pick at the girl about—about— Run on to your room, Hilda, and wash up for supper. I'll talk to this cross man. It'll be all right."

"If you'll excuse me, Mrs. Marchbanks, I don't want any supper," Hilda said; but she moved toward the stairs from which Maybelle had disappeared. The children were established at the dining table, eating noisily, poor, bewildered Miss Ferguson trying to wait on them. Fayte stood, a sandwich in his hand, backed against the sideboard, laughing silently at her.

"She'll stay, all right," he called, half tauntingly.

"I'll not!" At his words and tone Hilda whirled from the lowest step of the stairs. "I will not. You'll see!"

CHAPTER XXIX

THE RESURRECTION PLANT

IN her own room, the door slammed and locked, Hilda faced the situation. She fairly glowed and palpitated with the rage that ran like fire in her veins and seemed to burn out timidity and indecision. She'd done it now. Pearse had asked her to stay—and she'd told those people downstairs that she was going to leave. She would leave, too. If Pearse knew, he'd want her to leave. He'd want her to walk right out of the house.

Without stopping to change from her riding dress she hurried from closet to bureau drawers, pulling out things, throwing them on the bed, folding them, dragging out her trunk, her valises, and beginning to pack.

Movement in Maybelle's room; but the door between wasn't even touched. Well, she didn't want to talk to Maybelle. She had nothing to say to any of them. She was going home.

She worked more systematically now. The supper bell rang. Maybelle left her room and went down, humming, clattering on the stair. Then Mrs. Marchbanks herself came to call Hilda. Without opening her door Hilda repeated that she didn't want any supper.

“Not pouting, are you?”

“No, I'm not pouting.”

“Of course you aren't. Well, come down when you get hungry, then,” Mrs. Marchbanks said finally.

"I'll leave something on the table for you." And she went away.

Sounds of the household at supper down there; then people moving about, talking. After a while, they began to come upstairs, the children first, Mrs. Marchbanks with them, stopping to tap at the door and ask if Hilda was all right.

"Yes. All right, thank you, Mrs. Marchbanks."

The crispness of her tone seemed to send Mrs. Marchbanks away pretty promptly. Later Miss Ferguson's slow, precise tread, its hesitation at her door, then the going on. Hilda was glad of that. Miss Ferguson was a good sort, she meant well; but Hilda didn't want to see her now. Maybelle in her room again, moving about softly; the colonel's heavy step; sounds of him locking up; he and Fayette on the stair, quarreling as usual, but in low tones.

And then the house grew still, except for those light, almost stealthy movements in the next room. Finally they, too, ceased. It was after ten o'clock, and Hilda's work was done, when she suddenly realized that she should have taken off her riding clothes and packed them in the trunk. Well, it was locked, and strapped; they'd have to go in the bag now. She gave one last look around, to be sure she had forgotten nothing, then went to the window. That resurrection plant Maybelle had said she'd give her when she went home; she wanted it; the queer things didn't grow over on the plains of Lame Jones County. Yet—she didn't like to open the door and ask. Probably Maybelle was already asleep. She leaned out and looked; that other window beside hers was dark, and there sat the little plant in its bowl. Hilda made a long arm, reached around and transferred it to her own sill. She emptied the water in which it

had grown green, and left it to dry out so that it would be ready to carry away in the morning.

Through all the flame and rush of her, the thought of Pearse had never been absent from her a moment. At first there was a desperate, irrational idea that she would see him before she left. Then, as the mere physical work began to clear her mind, she knew that she couldn't do this. She'd have to write. After that, as she moved quietly, swiftly to and fro, her eyes went continually to the little table where pens and paper lay, her letter to Pearse forming itself in her mind. She wanted him to know that, if it had seemed possible, she would have stayed here as he asked her to. She must beg him to come over to the Sorrows. No—she shook her head above the dress she was folding—hadn't been able to do a thing with him any of the times when he was right there. It—crowding paper into slipper toes—it was different now. She'd say—she'd say—

Everything done, she went over and sat down. The sheet before her, the pencil in her hand, she sat a long time staring, not seeing it. The furious activity of her moments of packing and getting ready, the hot anger that had sustained them, were gone. Cold doubts huddled around the edge of her mind; they clamored for attention. Suppose Pearse wouldn't come over to the Sorrows? Suppose he changed back into that old Pearse she had known, who could be hard and indifferent? If she was here— When she could see him— But she was risking all in going away and trusting to a letter—

She finally began, wrote rapidly for a while, stopped, frowned at what she had written, tore it up, and sat thinking. This whole round of action she repeated several times. Then in desperation she dashed

down a few lines, signed, folded them, got them into an envelope—put her head down on the table and began to cry.

It wasn't noisy grief, just the slow tears of exhaustion. She must have cried herself to sleep.

What was it waked her? She sat up suddenly in the dark. Her lamp was out. Dim moonlight made a gray square of her window, and as she stared at it, there came once more the rattle of gravel against the glass—then a low, guarded whistle.

The house was still. It must be some time in the small hours. She didn't dare strike a match to look at her watch. She stole across and peered out between the curtains. Over there by the cottonwoods that gave the place its name—wasn't that a mounted man in their shadow? Pearse! It must be. It couldn't be any one else! She waved a hasty signal, then slipped over, got her own door open as silently as she could, and hurried down stairs.

As she struggled with the fastening of the front door, she was desperately afraid he might have been there longer than she knew—be discouraged—leave without seeing her. But she'd waved to him from the window. She thought he answered. Oh—the door gave at last, but noisily.

She crossed the court on winged feet; some one caught her in a rough embrace. A face was pushed down against hers. Some one whispered,

“You made a lot of noise getting out, girlie. Where's your bag?”

She drew back, bewildered, scared, answering mechanically: “It's upstairs.”

“Well—for the Lord's sake!”

That wasn't Pearse's voice—even in a whisper Hilda knew it wasn't. She'd known this wasn't

Pearse as soon as he touched her. Who was it? Who did he think she was? She tried to pull free. As her head went back, her eye caught the row of upper windows. The resurrection plant changed from Maybelle's sill to her own—the gravel on the pane—she'd blundered into some arrangement of Maybelle's!

"I'm not—" she began; but the man's fierce whisper interrupted,

"Shut up—whoever you are! Do you want to give the whole thing away?"

His grip on her arm dragged her back into the shadow. She saw a light flash up and go out in Maybelle's room, the movement of a window-curtain there. The man beside her saw it, too. But now there was noise in the house. He loosed his hold on her arm and backed away toward his pony. Hilda stood where she was and looked while the house over there became all lit up. What should she do? Slowly she went toward the side door, and, as she stood hesitating there, some one tore it open and stood in it—Colonel Lee Marchbanks, a bathrobe pulled on over his night-clothes.

"What the devil's this?"

"Oh, Hilda!" That was Mrs. Marchbanks, following him, getting ahead of him and taking hold of her. Fayte came from somewhere. Miss Ferguson was on the porch. The lights from the windows flickered over their faces. The sound of galloping hoofs came from the trail—two ponies, plainly.

"Who were those people?" the colonel demanded.

"Only one people, I guess," Fayte explained jeeringly, when she didn't answer. "Masters brought a led pony for her."

"Masters? Was that Pearse Masters?"

"Let me pass, Colonel Marchbanks." Hilda pushed by, the rest of them trailing after her.

In the hall they all came together, and the colonel, who had tripped on one of his flapping slippers and come up angrier than ever, exploded,

"You ought to be ashamed, Hilda! That young hound—here on my place—after he'd been as good as ordered off of it—you dressed and ready to run away with him! Oh, you can't lie out of it, young lady; any fool could see what was up. May—" Hilda saw that Maybelle was halfway down the stairs, a kimono pulled on, one bedroom slipper and one riding boot, which latter nobody but herself seemed to notice—"May, go back and step into this girl's room; see if she isn't already packed to leave."

"She—she is, Pa," Maybelle was almost whimpering. "I've just been in there. Everything she's got is packed up."

Then she was down the stairs in a rush, her arms around Hilda's neck, whispering,

"Don't. Don't give me away. Oh—Hilda! It won't make any difference to you. You don't want to stay here, anyhow. But—"

Hilda pushed her off and turned to Colonel Marchbanks. Of course, Maybelle's things were packed, too; under that kimono Maybelle was dressed, ready to have gone with that man.

"What Maybelle says is true," she told them all, "I'm going to leave in the morning."

"You'll leave for Lame Jones County in the morning," the colonel growled.

"Certainly. That's what I mean," Hilda agreed.

"Fayte, go dress," said his father; "I want you to ride in to the station and send a telegram to Pearsall. The rest of you get upstairs to bed."

CHAPTER XXX

THE RETURN

IT was strange to Hilda to be going home to Lame Jones County by railroad. Not once before, since that journey from New York that brought the Van Brunts to Texas, had she traveled on a train. The thought flitted vaguely through her mind—why she'd hardly know how to act—what to do.

But, once settled in the car, sunk in her own thoughts, she found that the people in the other seats or passing in the aisles were almost like shadows. Even the Marchbankses out there at the ranch, in that queer breakfast at dawn, Mrs. Marchbanks and Maybelle stealing down for it in wrappers, sitting with her under the colonel's watchful eye, hadn't been real people. They all swung in a sort of dream. Mrs. Marchbanks's little signals to her when the man at the end of the table wasn't looking—that trying to get in a word alone with her before the final good-by. What did it matter? Maybelle's anxious, apologetic whisper that she'd tried to find out what Pa said in his telegram—guessed it was just a notification to the folks at the Sorrows of Hilda's unexpected return—got little attention. Fayte wasn't at the table. Probably he hadn't come back from Juan Chico.

But, when they'd driven the miles in to the station, the colonel hardly speaking a word to her on the way, they didn't see anything of Fayte there, either—and Hilda felt sure that the colonel was both disappointed

and angry at that. He was angrier still when she openly posted with her own hand the note she had written to Pearse. Then they were checking her trunk; the colonel was having it brought close to the track where it could be loaded as soon as the train pulled in. Some one came hastily around the corner of the building, speaking to her as Miss Van Brunt, lifting his hat—the marshmallow man—the man who had stolen the ride with Maybelle on the way to the dance—the person Maybelle called Gene. In the morning light he looked more hard and objectionable even than she'd thought. His air was furtive. She moved back a step; he followed up, saying hurriedly:

"I didn't mean to be rough last night when you butted in on my game. Of course I took you for Maybelle. How about her? She send me any word? Have her folks found out anything? What's my chance to see her now?"

"What—what's all this?" Marchbanks pounced on them from around the pile of baggage—he had heard every word. "Stop—wait, Hilda!"

The train roared in; her trunk—the only one to go—was hustled aboard.

"Hold on!" But she went past him. It was the conductor who helped her up the step, while he shouted "All aboard!" As the train moved out, she looked back to see the two men confronted. The wheels gathered speed. Soon the station was a toy house, those two she'd left beside the track just little vibrating dots—and finally they were out of sight.

Thump-thump of the wheels—the swift-flying landscape outside of the windows . . . Time—place—were things that wavered, dissolved. She was again the little girl Hilda of nearly twelve years ago, on that journey from New York to Texas; her mother

lying ill in a berth the porter had made up; all the people trying to be kind to them, but the Masterses seeming like own folks; Pearse's mother sitting beside her mother, fanning the sufferer's pale face, and her Boy-On-The-Train making himself a little girl's hero. With this came more sense of reality than anything about her held. She could see it and feel it more vividly than she saw the conductor when he came through for her ticket now, or these other people about her in the seats of this other train.

Through the long day's journey, the stopping and starting, the getting on and getting off of passengers at stations, Hilda lived over and over the few short days that Pearse Masters—in the flesh—had occupied in her life; the many long hours that he had been with her mentally. Why he'd always been there. He was one of the fundamental facts of existence—like Uncle Hank.

He had asked her to stay in Encinal County so he could see her—once again, anyway. She'd failed him. She hadn't stayed. Well—but—she'd told him in that note why she couldn't stay. And she fairly begged him to come right over to the Three Sorrows as quick as he could. Would he do it? And if he did. . . . How would it be when he came?

At the lowest of her depression she had a sick, cold clammy feeling that what she'd done—hiding Pearse in the cyclone cellar, and never telling Uncle Hank all these years; keeping him out of sight when she met him that night at the camp-fire, and again when she saw him on the trail the day the rustlers were at the ranch; not admitting to Uncle Hank when he talked to her on the door-stone that there was such a person as Pearse in Encinal County, and that his presence was the greater part of the reason for her

wanting to go to the Alamositas to school—sometimes all this arrayed itself against her and seemed unforgivable. Then she'd excuse herself—and Pearse—by remembering how long ago most of it was. He was different now. She was different. Yet it was a very pale, spent Hilda who saw, for the first time, the roof-lines of the little new station out on the western edge of the Three Sorrows, who got up and followed with dragging step when a porter jerked her valises together and started out with them.

Uncle Hank was there to meet her with the buckboard. Well, it was a relief to have him to face—first. Uncle Hank was going to be the hardest part of it. She could deceive the others, if necessary; but she knew those kind blue eyes would look right through her.

And that's just what they seemed to do as he swung her down from the steps, searched her face gravely and said in a sort of subdued tone:

“My, it's a weight off my mind to have you here, all right, Pettie!” Then after another anxious survey of her pale cheeks, the lips that she couldn't keep from quivering, the eyes that were only bright because of unshed tears, he finished on a falling note, “I got Lee Marchbanks's telegraft about noon.”

The trunk had been thrown off. The train thundered away. Now Burch rode in from the trail, swung down from his pony, and came across to give her the usual funny, bumping kind of Burch kiss and ask in blunt boy fashion as he picked up the valises:

“What started you home all in a hurry before the term was over, Hilda? Not sick, are you?”

She glanced sidewise at Uncle Hank, who was bringing her trunk to lash on the back of the buckboard, and got a little shake of the head, which

showed that he alone had whatever disquieting information there was in that telegram of Colonel Marchbanks's.

"S'pose we leave sister tell us why she come home when she's ready to say, Bud," he suggested. "Reckon we're glad to see her—whatever's the reason. When folks get back 'tain't polite, right at the first go-off, to ask too many questions, or so I was fetched up to believe."

"All right, Uncle Hank." Burch, piling valises into the buckboard, grinned across at the old man strapping on the trunk. "Of course you'd stick up for Hilda, whatever she did. You always do. All I've got to say is that it takes something more than a quitter to get ready for college. Bet I beat her yet."

"I guess you will, Buddie." Hilda's foot was on the step. "I never said I was going to college, anyhow. Uncle Hank and I are going to be partners and run the ranch; you know that."

Burch stared up at her, absently chucking a bag to see if it was firm.

"Aw, that was the talk when we had to save money. We don't, now. Hilda," with a sharper look at her, "I believe you are sick. You look like it, anyhow."

"Ride on ahead, son," Hank said gently. "Tell Auntie we met the girl, and it's all right. You and her can talk out this college business when we get home. This child has had a hard trip. No wonder she looks sorta peaked; traveling on the railroad is mean work, if you ask me."

"But it's lovely to have our own station, right here on our own land," Hilda put in nervously. "It's ever so exciting."

"Ye-es," drawled Burch, grinning again as he

heaved himself into the saddle and held his pony for a moment close beside them. "I noticed how excited you were when you first came—just like some one walking in their sleep." He loosened the rein and galloped ahead.

There was a trying moment just after he was gone. Uncle Hank wouldn't demand anything of her—he never did. That was what made it so hard. She must begin. She couldn't begin. As though he felt her trouble, he said in a low tone,

"I wasn't aiming to ask any questions, Pettie." The hurt in his voice pierced her. "I can wait for you to say your say."

"Oh, can you, Uncle Hank?" Her voice was husky. "Would you do that? I think—or anyhow I hope—that he'll be over here at the Three Sorrows—well—soon. If you could wait until then—"

"I'll wait." The old man's eyes were fixed straight ahead, on the empty plain. "That telegraft of Lee Marchbanks's sorta made me think there might be a young man coming over here to see me pretty soon."

"Did it? Did they say it was—Pearse Masters?"

Hank glanced up at her with a brief nod.

"That's the name," he said with a sigh. "I'll show it to you," and he began searching through his pockets. "Long as it wasn't that feller Faye Marchbanks," he muttered half to himself, "I felt I had something left to be thankful for. What's that name again, Pettie? Masters?"

"Pearse Masters." Hilda, studying his face, saw that apparently he had never heard the name before. It meant nothing to him. But Pearse knew Uncle Hank by name; seemed to have known him—or known of him—a long time. Oh, why couldn't she have had a chance to be told about that before she came

home! The telegram was being smoothed out on her knee. She glanced down at it.

"Your ward, Hilda Van Brunt, made attempt to elope from my house with man named Masters. Am sending her home on this morning's train. MARCHBANKS."

She sat staring at it dumbly. Of course that was what the colonel would have said. But she could tell Uncle Hank the truth about that. She could tell him the whole thing. And he would believe her. As she began to speak, some one behind them called out, "Hi, Pearsall!"

Looking around, they saw the agent standing in the station door waving a paper. Uncle Hank turned, almost with an air of relief, went back and got it. Hilda watched as he read and re-read the message, spoke to the man over his shoulder, and then came toward her, his hat pushed back, his hair ruffled, demanding, as he turned the sheet over to her,

"What in time does this mean, Pettie? I can't make nothing of it. The agent says that it's been delayed. Looks like Marchbanks must have sent it soon after you took the train."

"He did," said Hilda, as she read. "He must have sent it right there at the station at Juan Chico." For the second yellow sheet that she and Uncle Hank now read together ran:

"Statement in my earlier message entire mistake. Very much regret whole circumstance and apologize to Miss Hilda. She behaved most honorably. She will explain.

"MARCHBANKS."

And explain Hilda did, as she and Uncle Hank finally drove away, headed for home. When all was

told, and Uncle Hank seemed relieved as she expected he'd be—he said slowly,

“And yet you tell me this young man, of the name of Masters, is coming over here to see me, Pettie?” Hank tried to smile. “No, you needn't answer that. I said I'd ask no questions. Looks like I might keep my word—for a few minutes, anyhow.”

The buckboard rattled ahead. Hank's wide gaze took in the Three Sorrows pastures, the glimpse, beyond there, of the low roof. There was the property he had pulled out of debt, saved for Charley Van Brunt's children. Not so young as he had been—no, not so young. Yet to Hilda's eyes, which had always seen him with the silver in his hair, he shouldn't have appeared noticeably older than when on that first occasion, in the office room, she, frightened that he was going away and leaving her, had wanted to say to him, in the words of her fairy tale, “If you will never forsake me, then I will never forsake you.” He stirred uneasily and began to speak.

“You got my last letter?”

Instantly there flashed into her mind the details of that letter: a sort of summing up of the Three Sorrows business affairs—in which he'd reminded her that she was said to be his partner in them, but in fact, though he was their guardian, she and Burch owned everything in full, and would be his employers, and he wanted her to see what this railroad proposition meant to the estate. It had come the day before the dance at Graingers. Other things, to her much more important, had so filled her thoughts that she had not answered it. She came to herself now with the knowledge that Uncle Hank was stealing glance after glance at her, apparently distressed by the look in her face.

"I—oh, of course, you did write me in the letter all about it," she said confusedly. "I guess I didn't quite understand. Are we—will it put us out of debt, Uncle Hank?"

"Pays everything." The old man smiled a little sadly. "With the State & Gulf Line running that spur right through here, gives a-plenty to pay off—and stands to make you and Burch rich young folks. Within a few years, if things is managed right, you'll be very rich, I doubt not. You can see from that, Pettie, why Lee Marchbanks's news of you—" He broke off and gave his attention to his team, finishing after a minute, "You will both be rich. I ain't uneasy about Burch. He's a boy; and old-headed at that. It's you—and—and things like this telegraft that scares me."

No, it wasn't that he really looked so much older; he seemed somehow stricken, disappointed. Why, he'd had that second telegram—she'd explained how the first one came to be sent—that it was all a mistake; yet he could sit there and tell her that the ranch was paid out of debt and they were going to be rich—and still look that way. Well, it was— Oh, didn't he know she wasn't forsaking him—that she never would? You might like another person very much too. That didn't mean—

"You—you will try to like him, Uncle Hank, when he comes—if he comes?" Hilda spoke with tremulous eagerness. "I—oh, I just feel as though it would break my heart if you and he weren't friends."

"All right, Pettie girl." Again that effort to smile; it made her throat choke up. "You know the Bible says it's hard for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. I've been told that the needle's eye is really a low gate, so called, and the beast has to kneel

down and shuffle through on his knees. Reckon that's the way any young men you bring around will have to come through with your Uncle Hank."

"Oh—I'm just hoping to get him over here for you to see—that's all." The red rushed up in Hilda's face; she flashed a shaky little smile at him. "How could he be a friend of mine—without being a friend of yours?"

He seemed about to answer that; thought better of it; finally said mildly:

"Pettie, s'pose we don't speak no more of the matter—till he comes. Let's put it by and be just like old times. There's your Auntie on the porch. It's doing Miss Valeria lots of good to be rich again. She's a'ready got in new servants. I doubt not she has many a fine plan laid for you—now that expense doesn't have to be considered."

But all time is new time. Even "times" are always new ones—never just like "old times." Always something has been taken out—or something added—that makes the new different. Here was Hilda eager, fond, loving everything and everybody on the ranch of the Three Sorrows more demonstratively than ever before in her life, yet Hank felt the difference as she rushed up the steps to greet her aunt, as she ran through the house to find Sam Kee in his kitchen.

An unseen presence seemed to come with her, very real: the young man who would be here in the flesh to-morrow—or the next day—or the next. Oh, he'd come. Hank never doubted that. Surely it was the thought of him that gave her such glowing cheeks, lit soft fires under the dusk of her lashes as they sat that night at the table.

"After all," smiled Miss Val, very complacent in the new order of things, "it's as well that Hilda's

come home. That ranch place wasn't very suitable. Mr. Pearsall and I have been talking about your future, Hilda. Probably a good finishing school near New York for awhile—and then travel."

Hilda and Uncle Hank exchanged a glance, both acutely conscious of the young man who was coming to the Three Sorrows on the next day—or the next. Neither said a word to Miss Valeria of the matter. They were still partners, that far. If Pearse Masters' coming was to be the wedge between them—it had not yet divided them completely.

CHAPTER XXXI

A TELEGRAM

A PALE Hilda, still plainly on nervous strain, sat at the breakfast table next morning. Uncle Hank—up and out an hour or two earlier—had ridden in for the meal. Aunt Valeria's whole attention went to the new waitress she was training. At a signal from her, the girl brought a yellow envelope on a tray and offered it to Hilda—from the wrong side.

Miss Valeria frowned, signaled again sharply; the telegram—it could be nothing else—was whisked away from her niece's eager fingers and properly presented. Hilda snatched it up and opened it with hands that shook.

Aunt Val and Burch were looking at her with frank inquiry and interest; but Uncle Hank, after one quick glance, paid close attention to his food.

"Oh," she said, the strain relaxing into tremulous smiles, "this is—it's a friend of mine coming over from Encinal County. He—he says he'll be here on the afternoon train."

Burch returned to his oatmeal; Aunt Valeria's expression invited further details; so Hilda went on,

"His name is Pearse Masters, Aunt Val, maybe you'd remember that the Masterses were people we met coming out to Texas; and when Mamma got sick, they stopped off in Denver with us and stayed till—stayed there through it all. They were gone before you got there—but perhaps you remember the name."

"Oh, yes, I remember very well," said Miss Valeria. "Does Mrs. Masters come with him? Are they living in New Mexico now?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Masters are both dead; this"—the color deepened in Hilda's cheeks; her voice wavered a little—"this is their son."

"Oh—a young man?" Miss Valeria went on with her breakfast, murmuring vaguely, "The afternoon train? He'll be here in time for dinner, then; that's very nice."

The talk went quite buoyantly after that, Hilda asking questions about things on the ranch—and hardly hearing the answers, Miss Valeria explaining new arrangements in the household matters. Now that there were plenty of servants, this small lady—who had never ceased to be a resident of New York merely sojourning on a Texas Panhandle ranch—took a great deal more interest in the Three Sorrows domestic machinery. It was after breakfast, in the hall, that Uncle Hank and Hilda came together alone.

"I'm so glad—" she began, oh, how unnecessarily! One look at her flushed cheeks and glowing eyes would have been enough. "I'm sure Aunt Val's going to like him. Burch already knows him—though, of course, I don't suppose he can remember—and now, if you—"

"If me," Hank said gently. "I can't see why you're uneasy about me, Pettie. No special reason for it, is there?"

"No—yes—Uncle Hank."

Hilda moved on with him to the office, where they could speak together without fear of interruption. "There is a reason; that's why I'm so glad he's coming over here—again."

"Again?" Quickly. "Has he ever been at the Sor-rers before? Not that I've known of."

Hilda's eyes never left the anxious face that confronted her as she told, at last, the whole story of her hiding Pearse Masters in the cyclone cellar, of the snatched interview during the drive up with the trail-herd. That was easy. She was glad now to share that with Uncle Hank. But when she came to the part over in New Mexico, the dance at Grainger's, the picnic on Caliente Creek, she found it harder going. Yet, the bare facts of these things too she got before him, tried to express something of what they meant to her, broke off blushing, and finally finished,

"So you see, he's The Boy-On-The-Train that I was always telling you about when I was a little girl, Uncle Hank. And when I hid him here on the Three Sorrows—he wasn't a cattle thief—but if the sheriff had got him that—"

"I see. I see, Pettie." Hank stood looking down, sorting out this new information. Finally he went on without looking at her:

"What you said in there at the breakfast table, and what you've said here to me, does make a good deal of difference. If that's all so—and, of course, I know it is so, when you tell me it is—what makes you keep on talking like you thought this young man and me might not take to each other? That he should have persuaded you into hiding him here in the Sorriers unbeknownst to me—I ain't holding that up against him. Must have been but a boy at the time. You was only a little girl. Reckon he was scared. Didn't know me, and had knowed you and your folks before. I reckon that was all there was to it, wasn't it?"

"Not—not quite all, Uncle Hank." Hilda was trembling. Her face burned, her eyes wavered and fell away from his. "He—he did seem to know about you, and—there seemed to be something—something—" her voice failed her. After a moment, she was able to finish, in a husky whisper, "He didn't feel friendly—to you."

"Sho!" Uncle Hank looked at her blankly. "Seemed to know me? I've been figgerin' he was a son of the Masters that was part owner of the J I C company out there in Encinal. Rich eastern man, as I recollect it. Them the people?"

"Yes," said Hilda faintly. "Mr. Masters died just before Pearse came out West—you know—the time I hid him here."

"Left his share in the company to the boy," Hank nodded. "Well, it ain't anything against him to be a rich man's son. Some of 'em are some account." He spoke heavily. Hilda felt that he was making an effort. She hurried to help out.

"Oh—he isn't quite that. They had other children, grown up, that got most of what was left. They'd given Pearse a fine education—but he's really sort of poor. He says it's just a little share he has in the J I C. He wasn't even sure he'd get that. But he loves this western country just the same as you and I do." An appealing glance. "So that's what brought him out here when Mr. Masters died—he came to get a job with the J I C. And he got it. And he worked awfully hard. He was promoted three times in the first year. And now he's doing splendidly. He—"

She stopped, looking entreatingly in his face. He said very quietly:

"You think a heap of him, don't you, Pettie?"

"Oh, I do. And you will, too, Uncle Hank, when you know him."

"Well, dear," he said slowly, "I'm bound to warn you that it sorta puts my bristles up—the idea of a young feller that's a friend of yours, and that I hain't never seen, coming all set to be unfriendly with me—your guardian. It—Hilda"—when had he ever used her full name like that!—"it don't look so good to me. Well—what is it, Buster?" as a head was poked in at the door. "Want me over at the north pasture, this morning? All right," with apparent relief; then to Hilda, "Run tell Sam Kee to put me up a snack, Pettie. Have to make a day of it up there, I reckon. But if I ain't on hand when your company first gets here, you and Miss Valery can make him welcome. Reckon I won't be missed."

He seemed to become aware that he'd spoken disconcertingly, smiled and patted her shoulder.

Hilda wanted to say that he would be missed—very much—but she had a habit of truth-telling that interfered. She got the lunch for him, ran out to the corral with it, and stood looking rather blankly after the two men as they rode away. The thought that Uncle Hank and Pearse might never like each other at all, might actually quarrel, that the thing which Pearse seemed to hold against the older man might turn out to be something that couldn't be explained away— Well, only a few hours now. She flew to the kitchen, borrowed broom, cloths, dustpan, from Sam Kee, rolled her sleeves high, tied a towel over her hair, and slipped down to the cyclone cellar to make it beautiful for Pearse's first view of it. Here—nowhere else—they two alone—he would tell her. She would know at last.

Captain Snow had followed down; while she

worked he dozed on the foot of the couch where Pearse had slept, on the blanket which he had sent to her as a gift. But her noisy cleaning work annoyed the old cat. He was getting to an age when he disliked excitement. He finally jumped down, ambled gravely across and mewed to be let out, swishing his fluffy tail and pawing delicately at the door edge. Hilda let him go, an unusual frown between her brows. She worked on, periods of absolute rigidity alternating with moments of fiercely energetic action, till Sam Kee's gong sounded above stairs—and she wasn't decent for the table, let alone dressed to go over and meet Pearse.

Hilda started for the station very soon after lunch. When the buckboard came around, Burch jeered that she'd be fully an hour early for the train. But once she had seen her little retreat all spick and span, the checkerboard she and Pearse had played so many games on laid out, the books they had read together on the shelf, she was too restless to wait longer.

At the station the agent came out as she rode up; looked very hard at her and called the time. Indifferently, it flitted through her mind; oh, yes, all those telegrams had come through his hands. Of course, he knew. He understood who this was she was meeting. She tied her ponies to the rack and began walking up and down.

She couldn't be still. She looked at her watch every few minutes, tried to make a game counting her steps. Some men rode up, dismounted, and went into the office; people she'd never seen before. There were a lot of new folks around now. The railroad brought them, maybe. The clicking of the instrument in there, sound of voices; she made her path a little farther away, so that she shouldn't hear, so that

it might not interfere with her thoughts, then, in a panic, was afraid she might be too far off when the train arrived, came back and found a box a little way up the track, where she could sit down and wait.

All at once she knew she was tired. There by the track, the sky a great blue span above her, she dropped into a musing so deep that time went swiftly by; it seemed but a moment when there was a little speck far off on the horizon, coming nearer. Suddenly, and strangely, she was the little girl Hilda, waiting for Uncle Hank on the door-stone. No—that little moving speck, far off and coming nearer, wasn't Uncle Hank on Buckskin. That was Pearse's train. Swiftly it grew; there was a humming now, a puff of smoke, the diminished hoot of the whistle.

"She's going to stop. Some one to get off." The station agent had come out with those other men. He was hanging a mail bag on the crane. The train was pulling in. Pearse was here!

Under three pairs of curious eyes—those that might look from the train didn't count—they shook hands. Nothing really said till they got over to the buckboard, and then Hilda, as he helped her in, the happiness of it all looking out of her shining eyes, glowing on her cheeks, whispered:

"It was awfully good of you, Pearse, to come so soon. I was afraid, when I wrote you, that you wouldn't—"

"Did you write me a letter?" Pearse stopped, looking up at her. "What did it say?"

"Oh—just explained that I couldn't stay any longer at the Marchbankses' and asked you to come over here instead. Why, Pearse—if you didn't get it, how did you know to come?"

Pearse laughed a little, circled the buckboard, and

got in on the other side, taking up the lines she offered him, and starting the ponies.

"You seem to think I need a good deal of bringing, Hilda," still smiling. Then, after a quick, sidelong glance at her face, where the lowered lashes made a sweeping dusk against flaming cheeks, "I don't. But I wish I'd had your letter too."

"I wonder why you didn't get it."

"Oh, I wouldn't have got it. You say you posted it at the station? It wouldn't have gone out to the ranch till night; one of the boys always rides in and fetches the mail in the evening; and when evening came I was in Juan Chico. You know what a little town like that is—everybody'd heard of your having gone home. Faye had talked, too, when he came in to send that telegram, about how I'd been at the Alamositas in the small hours, with a led horse, to steal you."

Hilda's heart leaped guiltily at the words.

"But," she began hastily, "but the colonel knows better than that, now. He knows who it was came to the ranch that night. It was by mistake the man got my window instead of Maybelle's. It"—she stared down at her fingers, speaking in a very small voice—"it was awfully silly of me to think you'd come back and throw gravel on my window; but I'd been asleep, and—before that—I'd just finished writing my letter to you; and you know how confused everything is when you're waked up suddenly that way. I heard it, and—I ran down—and never realized till he spoke that it wasn't you—that it couldn't have been you, of course."

"Oh—it couldn't have been me, of course—eh?" Pearse echoed, his voice a little unsteady. And then,

for a long moment, there was no sound but the quick, soft thud of the horses' hoofs.

"We"—Hilda tried to speak in a nice, practical tone—"we're sensible, aren't we, Pearse?"

"I suppose we are," Pearse conceded, a bit grudgingly. "And I've got to see your people, and—"

"Yes, of course," Hilda broke in nervously. "That's what I said in my letter. I asked you to come over and have the little talk you spoke of—and make friends with Uncle Hank."

"You're still thinking that it will be making friends?" Pearse stiffened a bit, and pulled the horses down to a slower pace. "More likely that Pearsall and I will never have anything to do with each other, Hilda; that it'll have to be you and me—or you and him." Then, slackening the lines so that the horses went forward faster, "Colonel Marchbanks and Gene Denner fought all over the station platform. Everybody knows now who was at the Alamositas that night, and what girl he was after—everybody but the Marchbankses did know already about Maybelle's affair with that fellow."

"Oh, but it's different with us," Hilda's voice failed at the end of that statement. She had no words to answer as Pearse asked softly, looking straight ahead,

"Are you sure it's so different?"

They were at the gate, turning in to the long avenue of box elders, and she caught at the first little commonplace thing to say, with,

"Look at our trees, Pearse. Aren't they lovely? Haven't they grown a lot since the last time you saw them? Right over there is the spring at the head of the *asequia* where you came in that day. You can't quite see it from here for the mound—Burch used to

call it the little mountain when he was a baby—that mound's over the cyclone cellar."

There wasn't another word said till Pearse was lifting her down at the steps, and Aunt Val rose from a rocker on the porch to meet them. Miss Van Brunt seemed to like at once this tall, good looking young fellow who had known her brother and her brother's wife and children. She felt that such a person had background, and background was the thing she was apt to miss in her western acquaintances. Burch came out and said "Hello," amusingly certain that he perfectly remembered Pearse, and took the visitor up to the room which had been prepared for him. When they came downstairs again, Hilda was waiting for them.

"I'm going to show Pearse over the place a bit while it's still light enough to see things," she said easily, then in a half-whisper, "Quick, Pearse. Come this way. Around the house. We'll have to go in by the back. Nobody knows about my cyclone cellar yet."

They ran, hand in hand, like two children, ducking under the low-swung branches of trees, skirting shrubs. When they burst into the kitchen, old Sam Kee, straightening up from the range where he was sliding a pan of biscuits into the oven, looked at them with such twinkling eyes that Hilda was sure he had already watched Pearse's arrival.

"You know who this is, don't you, Sam?" she smiled.

"Sure, I know," the Chinaman grinned back at her. "Plitty nice boy you got. Fine young man, now."

"That was good coffee and chow you gave me," Pearse offered diplomatically.

"This dinner-time more good chow." Sam Kee's

yellow face was a pucker of amiability. "You stay here, I feed you all time good chow."

"Well, that's something to stay for," Pearse said solemnly, and the Chinaman went off into long, silent chuckles. Hilda was already calling over her shoulder:

"Come on, Pearse. If dinner is as near ready as all this, we've got to hurry."

With her leading, they crossed the big cellar and threaded the passage. But once in that little chamber of memories, how was either of them to remember that life presented any problems, that there might be breakers ahead? Pearse went from one thing to another admiring; Hilda had full reward for making the place so fine and festive.

"Why—you've kept every one of them!" Pearse looked around at his gifts, proudly displayed.

"Yes. I showed them to the folks. They were too lovely to keep entirely to myself; but after that I brought them down here."

"I'll get you a better serape than this." Pearse fingered the blanket on the couch. "I know where I can pick up a Hanno Chaddie—that means 'chief's blanket'—ever see one?" And he went on to tell her of the pattern.

But it made no difference what either of them said, one thing lay under it all—Pearse had come back—as he said he would. He'd walked up the front steps this time; he'd met and made friends with Miss Valeria and Burch. Now there remained—Uncle Hank. After they'd talked a while, eagerly, of that former time of hiding here in the cyclone cellar, Pearse said suddenly:

"Shall you tell Pearsall about having hidden me here, that time?"

"I've already told him, Pearse. Was that wrong? Didn't you want me to?"

"Doesn't make any difference. I suppose I'd have told him myself when I saw him. I suppose I shall see him to-morrow, shan't I? He's on the ranch, isn't he?"

"To-morrow? You'll see him to-night, Pearse. At dinner—in a few minutes, now. He might come in any time."

She hurried over to the little window and stood nervously pushing the vine lattice aside so that she saw the spring, the stream, the little bridge that led across to the bunk house. And at the instant she caught sight of a familiar figure crossing and whirled, crying:

"Pearse—there's Uncle Hank, now! Come on."

"All right—tell you all about it on the way up," Pearse said almost desperately, and while they hurried stumblingly, through the dark cellar, he talked in hasty, broken sentences.

"What! What!" Hilda cried out. Then, "Oh, if I'd only known when you were here before—if you'd only told me then!"

She clutched his hand and pulled him close after her. Both of them flushed, excited, they ran across the kitchen and came in behind Uncle Hank in the hall, moving toward the open door of the office just ahead. As Hilda, still drawing Pearse with her, followed, and pulled the door shut behind them, her call rang out strangely:

"He's here, Uncle Hank! He's come!"

CHAPTER XXXII

AN ARRIVAL

IN the office Hank faced sharply around, and the tall men stood looking at each other; there was a moment of silence, in which the cooing of Sam Kee's pigeons could be heard. Hilda was breathing short.

"I—I thought maybe you'd know him," she faltered at last, and Uncle Hank looked from one of them to the other in astonishment.

"I reckon this is young Mr. Masters, ain't it, Pettie?"

"Henry Pearsall Moseley," Pearse made the statement he had made to Hilda in other words as they crossed the cellar down there. "Masters is the name of my adopted parents. I just told Hilda. But she didn't want to wait for details. She hurried me right up here to you. I—I had thought, myself, that it would be better to speak to you alone, at first. You would rather not have her hear—"

He made a significant pause. Hank wasn't listening; all his soul seemed to be in the gaze he set on this young man. When he spoke, it was to say, huskily, wonderingly,

"Harry!" Then slowly, "It is you. Yes—seems I must have knowed you, even without the name. You've got the look of your mother, boy."

At that mention of his mother, Hilda saw an angry gleam come into Pearse's eyes.

"See here!" he burst out. "I've not told Hilda anything but my name—and that I'm your stepson.

She'd never have known from me that you and my mother were separated, and that you turned your back on me, as though I'd been a stray dog. But if you want her to hear it—"

"No! Oh, no!" Hilda broke in before Hank could find words. "That wasn't the way of it, Pearse. Uncle Hank told me long ago about the little son he loved so, and— Oh, tell him, Uncle Hank! Tell him quick!"

"Come over here. Set down. Both of you," said Hank's quiet voice. "We got to get the rights of this." He took his place in the desk chair. As they were getting settled so that they faced him, Pearse said more mildly,

"I'm sorry I spoke as I did just then. I don't want to make Hilda feel bad. I'm willing to let bygones be bygones—if you will, sir."

"So, my boy's come back to me, after a-many year—come back with a grudge against me, has he, Harry? Of all the things I thought to expect—that wasn't, somehow, one. And what you said just now about me and your mother having parted? She never told you such a word. Where did you get it?"

"From Uncle Jeff Aiken," said Pearse bitterly. "The man you shoved me off on—that you had shoved her off on."

"Jeff Aiken ain't no uncle of yours." Hank's tone was patient. "He's but the man who married your father's sister. Shoved you off on him? When you and Mattie went there to visit—at her wish, son—you was well furnished with money, and I sent money regular. After the Lord took her, I sent money for your keep with Aiken for two years— And by that time—well—well—"

He searched in the desk drawer, found a packet of

letters, laid them beside him. "Them's Mattie's, son. I'll leave you read them later. You'll find in them if she thought she was cast off. Here's some of Aiken's, receipting for the money I sent for your board and schooling, telling me that you was doing well and wished to stay where you was at. And I've got another here, the one you wrote before you took and run away from him. . . . Poor little feller."

The yellowed sheet Pearse and Hilda read, sitting there side by side, was a child's appeal to the father he still trusted to come and take him away from a home that had become intolerable. As Pearse looked from it into Hank's face and back again, his own face went through many changes of emotion.

"I felt pretty bad when I wrote that," he said doubtfully. "I had no idea there was any money being sent for me. Uncle Jeff's way was, when he'd come to a deadlock and licked me till he was afraid to lick any more, to start in on a tongue-lashing. He could hurt me worse that way than he could with a stick, and he knew it. He'd tell me that you and mother had separated when she left Texas, and that you said you never wanted to see my face again. Sometimes I didn't believe him. After a while I did. I just wrote that letter on a chance, and because I was desperate."

"Yes. I know." Hank nodded. "When I went back there—as I did—at the news that you had run away, I found how things had been. Aiken thought he was justified—if such a man can be said to think a-tall. Told me that your mother had spoiled you, and some one had to take holt and straighten you out. Admitted that he set in to break your will. Man of his sort gets that idea into his head about a child—he'll go to any lengths. He held out my let-

ters on you. Why, Harry, I wrote as regular as the time come, hoping all the while that you'd change your mind and want to come back to me. All I'd get in answer would be Jeff's receipt for the money, and his statement that you was satisfied where you was and hadn't seen fit to write. He still justifies himself—Aiken does—says he done it for your good."

"If I had only known." Pearse was back in the bitterness of his boyhood struggle.

"Or if I'd known," said Hank. "But the first word I got was when you run away. It come to me late, by the hand of a rider that chanced to be passing and brought my mail. I was right in the middle of the fall roundup, but I dropped everything and struck straight for Missouri."

Hilda's hand found Uncle Hank's; Pearse already held her other. The three of them drew together.

"I pretty near run through everything I had trying to hunt you up. Looked like I just couldn't turn back to Texas without my child. Ranches and cattle and roundups and such"—he gesticulated helplessly with his free hand—"they looked like nothing but a pack of foolishness to me then. Didn't seem nothing in the world of any real value at the side of a little tow-headed feller that had run away—that was lost to me—out in the world somewheres. I sold my ranch. Most that it brought went into the search for you. It was when I give up and thought that you must be dead that I took this job as manager of the Sorrers. And after I'd been here three or four years the company sold to Pettie's mother, and Pettie herself come out here to sorta fill the place that you'd left so turrible vacant."

"Father!" Hilda thought that word in Pearse's

voice must make up to Uncle Hank for a great deal. "Nobody on earth ever meant as much to me as you did. That's why it hurt so when I had to believe you weren't what I'd always thought you. A poor fool of a kid—are you going to forgive me?"

"Ah, law, son! If I could be forgiven my own sins as easy as I can overlook your being a little too ready to be suspicious of me, and sorta holding onto a bad view of me whether the evidence seemed sufficient or not—if I could do that, I'd sure have a clean record."

In the deep silence that followed came again the velvety coo of Sam Kee's pigeons. A belated bee from the hive out near the spring circled in through the window, hummed drowsily once around the room, and blundered out again. In the back hall the gong made its low-toned, persuasive announcement under the Chinaman's hand. Steps came down the stairs, Miss Valeria's little high-heeled slippers. A resounding bang from the living-room told that Burch had clapped-to the lid of his desk.

In the crimson and gold glories that streamed from the west, last of the sunset fires, the three rose and stood together a moment lingeringly. Hank's eyes wandered out over the prospect in front, basking in that radiance, then took on a far-away, dreamy look.

"The evening's a mighty sweet time, too," he said low, as though speaking to himself.

"We'll go and tell the others, now, won't we?" Hilda suggested with tremulous eagerness, as Pearse's hand holding hers closed tighter over it. And when Hank turned and looked from her face to his boy's, he saw on them the morning.

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